Prince Henry sighed in frustration as he lifted his considerable frame from his chair and slowly began to circuit the table. Oblivious to the other men of power in the room, he took a brief moment to inspect an elaborate tapestry that hung on the wall.

The brightly coloured embroidery depicted a much more prosperous era of his kingdom's history. Once Rubrumterra numbered territories in New Sobrius, southern Malpasse and northern Rigar; however the kingdom had fallen on hard times. The Great War had cost the kingdom dearly and now all that remained of the realm was the island of Great Rubenterra and a few insignificant islets dotted around the Anriac bay. The once great empire had been lost several generations before Henry had been born and now members of his house were forced to bow to the wishes of others.

Henry's stupor was rudely interrupted by Ambassador Xang, "So do we have an agreement?" he asked.

Henry paused in his response, taking a moment to scrutinise the ambassador. The man was of slight frame, almost a whole head shorter than the prince and possessed the folded upper eye lids that were unique to the people of Tsuki. Many a Rubrumterran noble had allowed his unimposing

physique to mislead them in negotiations, though the prince was more than aware of the sharp wit and remarkable intelligence possessed by this exotic man from beyond The Great Wall. “Perhaps,” the prince muttered reluctantly, “though there are still several details that we need to go over.”

At his response the ambassador furrowed his brow, “But in principle?”

“Yes, we do,” the prince replied.

The prince hated that he had been forced into this position. He was effectively putting an end to the tanning industry in Partallow, the nation’s capital, but he really didn’t have a choice in the matter. Xang’s people, the Tsukese, already had a stranglehold on the market and a tanning warehouse closed in Partallow every week. Products from the Tsuki Empire were cheaper, more abundant and flowed into Great Rubrumterra carried by the ships of the endless Tsukese Empire. The prince hoped that some tanning warehouses could be saved by the deal, though he doubted it. Effectively, he had just gifted the Tsukese leather industry to the Tsukese empire.

Ambassador Xang had been dealing with the prince for the past year, ever since the old king had fallen ill and had not been able to participate in proceedings. The two often socialised outside of the palace but both adopted different temperaments when business was at hand. A natural showman, the

ambassador had enjoyed humiliating the prince, particularly as there had been an audience present to view proceedings. Two minor royals, Prince Yazzi and Princess Xanthi represented the Tsukese Empire, Captain Kelly was in attendance on behalf of the New Sobriun Republic and Adalella and Durki; two Rigarian tribesmen, were also present.

Prince Henry felt utterly belittled.

A man's agonising scream pierced the sound of whining horses as his shoulder was ripped from its socket. Not yet dead, the man's tormentors slapped the rear of the horses again and this time he was severed at the midriff by the powerful animals.

Sheikh Aziz looked on as others around him relished in the man's death and the carnage that unfolded in the town square. The young sheikh didn't share his brothers' joy; however he did understand the necessity of the punishment. The man, though he no longer resembled anything close to human form, had been preaching blasphemy and for this there was only one possible outcome. With the ritual almost complete, only the ceremonial removal of the victim's heart remaining, the sheikh left the town square.

Immediately two guards filled the space behind him and he was joined by Adaq, his chief advisor and oldest friend.

“Another barbaric day in Lunan!” Adaq commented as they made their way towards one of the many royal palaces in the capital city.

Sheikh Aziz couldn’t help but smile. Though to all outward appearances his friend was a stout believer in the Nasir faith, he often indulged in many of the taboos that were condemned by the religion. The sheikh and several senior court members were aware of his misdemeanours, but chose to turn a blind eye to his antics. Adaq was fundamental to the fragile union between Al-Rigar and New Sobrius and had proven himself useful time and time again to the royal family. Also, Aziz liked him. “And what would you have me do with a blasphemous traitor?” the sheikh inquired in jest, keeping his voice barely above a whisper. *After all, even a sheikh was subject to the piety of the Muntiari,* he thought to himself.

“Well...” Adaq attempted to look traumatised by the conundrum. “You could always have had him stripped naked and chased to the city gates by the priesthood? I always enjoyed watching the old men struggling for breath as a child.”

The sheikh laughed, catching the attention of several members of the mob.

“My lord,” Adaq interjected. “The New Sobriun ambassador awaits you.” Adaq always sensed danger far before any normal human being could. It was a supernatural ability of his and one that had contributed toward his survival at court and his success in business.

The two continued in their journey towards the palace and, once out of earshot of the mob, continued in their banter. Neither of them remained to watch the final execution of the day. A young woman had been discovered by her father with a man that she was not married to. She was now buried up to her neck in sand while her father and lover stoned her to death. The spectacle unfolded to the amusement of the gathered mob and to the cheering of the crowd.

“Burgh!” Prince Henry groaned. He was incredibly hungover. After his arduous and ultimately unsuccessful negotiation with Ambassador Xang, he had thought to drown his sorrows in a fine bottle of Whiskey from the Rubrumterran highlands. It had been a mistake.

“Coming,” he whined, barely able to lift his voice above a whisper.

Opening the door, he was greeted by a court page. He did not know the servant's name but was struck by his Rigarian appearance. In recent years, more and more Rigarians had been emigrating to Partallow in the hope of finding a more prosperous existence and to enjoy the freedoms of the once great island nation. However, there were increasing social problems amongst the populace. The number of Nasir worshippers had increased astronomically and they were now trying to impose their beliefs on the other inhabitants of the island. So far there had only been a few isolated murders and riots, but it was a situation that was fast escalating out of control. "What do you want?" the prince asked unceremoniously of the page.

Despite the prince's manner, the page was incredibly eager, "The king commands you to an audience."

The implications of the page's message dawned on the prince with remarkable speed. The king had been ailing for a very long time and Henry had been waiting for bad news. "What is it concerning?" he asked.

"His Majesty gave me these instructions," the page replied and paused for effect. He was obviously relishing his assignment: it was probably the most important day of his life.

"Yes?" the prince prompted.

“His Majesty told me to inform his highness that his health is well.”

The prince sighed out loud, evident relief showing on his face.

“Though there are urgent matters of state that must be attended to,” the page continued.

Henry had been rather too eager to drown his sorrows the previous night and must have drunk a great deal, a fact that was now becoming apparent. He briefly remembered promising a young noble women from Malpasse his hand in marriage and gambling away a small fortune at the cards table. Henry was not usually so overindulgent, but was well known for losing himself when things didn’t go his way. It was a small flaw in an otherwise much loved and admired character who had become popular at court and amongst the people. He was the Admiral of the Royal fleet; having proven himself in countless skirmishes and several major battles and was steadily learning the intrigues of court during his father’s absence. However, he currently longed for bed and hoped that the father of the young noblewoman whom he had promised to wed would be easy to bribe. “How urgent?” he asked the page.

The page stuttered, his only evident breach of discipline. Obviously he was aware of the prince’s conscientious reputation and was surprised to find

him so willing to shirk his duties. “The king commanded me to bring you,” he said.

Utterly disorientated and becoming a little frustrated with the overly zealous page, Henry held back a discourteous retort. Henry knew that the page was merely doing as commanded and he succumbed to the inevitable. Allowing the young Rigarian into his chamber, Henry sighed. He longed for a hot shower and a day of sloth: reading literature, eating exotic fruits and perhaps ending it with a visit to the Royal theatre.

Aziz and his trusted advisor finally gained entry to the sheikh’s palace as a chorus of song filled the air; emanating from the thousands of churches scattered around the city of Lunan.

Confident that they were unobserved by any zealots, Adaq rolled his eyes. “Time to offer the Great One another five minutes of our time,” he said.

“Would you care to join me?” Aziz offered.

“Of course,” Adaq responded, forcing himself to smile. “And I’d love to join you for the other six prayers today too. Couldn’t think of anything better to do with my time. It’s not as if I have trade caravans to dispatch, deliveries to receive or matters of state to see to.”

Aziz laughed out loud in genuine amusement. “Well you are welcome to forgo the customary midday prayer. But I am only a sheikh.” His words took on a more serious tone, “If you were witnessed to be neglecting your spiritual duties to the Nasir and to God, even a sheikh would be helpless to protect you.” His smile had now been fully extinguished and substituted with a frown. With a gesture of his head he indicated a gathering group of Muntiari, the strict enforcers of Nasir Law who resided in the numerous churches throughout the Kingdom of Al-Rigar and forced ‘God’s will’ on the people. ‘God’s Will’ usually consisted of abstinence, devotion and extreme punishment for those unwilling to fall in line with Muntiari doctrine. They were a power unto themselves and friction between the monarchy and the Muntiari had been growing for some time.

“Shall we?” Adaq made an expansive gesture, indicating the direction of the private royal church.

“We shall,” Aziz confirmed.

Adaq followed his master and friend, the most powerful man in all Al-Rigar into his private sanctuary, removing his sandals at the door. The two participated in the religious rites with several other minor members of the royal family; the more senior members of the monarchy were overseeing military garrisons either alongside The Great Wall or at the disputed border

with Heim. Having completed the first of seven daily cleansing rituals and making brief yet polite conversation with distant cousins of the sheikh, the pair exited the royal church and made the short journey to the sheikh's private quarters.

The New Sobriun ambassador was not due for an hour or so and, never a man to be considered idle, the sheikh forced Adaq into a bout of sparring. Sheikh Aziz was slight of frame and incredibly fast of movement, making him the more accomplished swordsman of the two. He was a young monarch, only recently coming to power following the premature death of his brother three years earlier. His skin was light brown in colour, much fairer than many of the Rigarian people due to the callings of his position and the late hours that he kept seeing to matters of state. His hair was cut short as was the custom with the Nasir, particularly after a pilgrimage to the holy city of Raqman, and he possessed an inch long beard that framed his dark features. In stark contrast, his friend Adaq had allowed his hair to grow long and shaved daily. It was a lifestyle choice that had brought him to the attention of the Muntiari who often cultivated beards over two feet in length.

Aziz landed a painful blow on Adaq's right shoulder, bringing the bout to an end. "Ow!" Adaq exclaimed, rubbing the point where the blunted sword

had surely bruised his skin beneath the protective clothing. “I was unsighted,” he complained.

Adaq always had a suitable excuse prepared for his shortcomings, a fact that never failed to amuse Aziz. “Well perhaps you should crop your hair?” he suggested.

Adaq considered his appearance in the reflection of his sword, “I don’t think so,” he jested. “I don’t think the ladies at court would appreciate me as much.”

Aziz was more than aware that Adaq’s greatest weakness was his vanity. He took great pride in his appearance and his ability to seduce various women at court; despite the severe punishment that lay in store for him should he be caught. He enjoyed danger and relished in undermining the Muntiari at every opportunity.

The messenger wore a hooded cloak making it impossible to distinguish any of his features. He moved invisibly through the throng of the midday crowds without attracting attention to himself. Clutched tightly to his chest he carried a secret document of unimaginable power, one that would bring him inconceivable wealth and glory.

He had been waiting nearly two hours for the Nasir to be called to prayer. The mayhem that filled the streets as thousands travelled to church was perfect cover for him to make his way to the wharf. Now he was almost there. He could see the ship that was to carry him to safety and unburden him of his precious cargo. Calmly the messenger pressed against the throng of dockside workers hurrying to church until he broke free from the masses and made his way towards the ship.

He was alarmed by the man who greeted him on the deck of the ship, neither by his appearance nor his manner but by his importance. He was considered one of the most powerful people in all of Sobrius, particularly by his own people. The man greeted him in his native language and asked to be shown the document that he had cradled so dearly for the past few hours. Instantly the messenger produced the document from within his cloak and handed it over to the powerful man. He had been trained well but obedience to the nobility was ingrained in the very fibre of his race.

The nobleman broke the seal of the document and quickly scanned the text, nodding as he neared the end of the script. The slight inclination of his head was a signal that would cost the messenger his life. Two Marines seized the messenger's arms as another calmly pulled back his head and slit his throat. The crimson fountain was directed over the bow of the ship by the two

soldiers, followed by the messenger's body which was quickly tossed overboard. Without acknowledging the work of the Marines, the nobleman disappeared below decks into his private cabin as the captain and crew frantically made ready to set sail.

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The prince quickly dressed with the aid of the overly eager page and was travelling through the mob of the city within minutes. He had no idea what hour of the day it was, though judging by the positioning of the sun, he would have guessed around midday. His presumption was confirmed when the churches of the Nasir began bellowing out the call to prayer. Not helping his hangover in the slightest, the prince pulled his cloak over his head to muffle the overwhelming sound.

The passage through the city took less time than normal and, following his initial adversity to the call to prayer, the prince was content to stare reflectively out of the window of his carriage. The majesty of Partallow passed the prince by without him paying attention to the familiar beautiful architecture. Most travellers were rendered speechless by the beauty of the

city, the legacy of a once powerful and dominant empire. Some of the older buildings were the giants of their age and, though they were now surpassed by the erections of other cities in terms of scale, their beauty still lingered: testament to a more prosperous time in a declining country and a faltering economy.

The prince arrived at the Royal Hospital, now the permanent residence of his father; king Alfred V, and was vexed to find that he was accompanied by the same Rigarian page who had rudely awakened him from his slumber.

“Go away,” the prince snapped, instantly regretting his vulgarity.

“With all respect Highness, I don’t think you can say that,” replied the page.

Of all the responses that the prince was expecting, that was not one of them. “Pardon?” Henry replied.

“Please, Highness,” responded the page, “All will be revealed.”

Completely gobsmacked, Henry faltered in his step. Only his father and some of his tutors had ever spoken to him in such a manner, “What?” he demanded. “You cannot speak to me like that!” Henry had never had a quick temper. Even now he was a mix of amusement and anger. He didn’t know what to make of the wiry young page.

“Sorry Highness but this is very urgent, please just come with me.” The page turned his back on Henry and led the way towards his father’s chamber. After a momentary pause, Henry muttered something under his breath, shrugged his shoulders and gave chase to the page; albeit at a leisurely pace. He was also trying his best to hide a grin, for some reason he admired the strange little servant.

On entering his father’s chamber Henry immediately knew that something was amiss. Only three people were present: himself, his father and the strange page. The nurses had propped up his father on the large feather filled mattress that served as his bed and as he approached the king, he heard a sentry lock the door behind him and take up position to guard the portal. It was clear that the king did not want to be disturbed.

“Father...” Henry started, but he was instantly cut off by the king.

“We don’t have time for pleasantries,” his father croaked.

Henry considered that his father looked healthier than usual, though it was still only a matter of months before he passed away. *‘What could be so urgent?’* he pondered.

“Sit,” his father indicated a chair, “and listen,” he commanded.

Only five people were permitted to enter the great meeting chamber, one of the older parts of the sheikh's palace. The design was a simple domed roof supported by four columns void of any decoration or aesthetic beauty: conforming to Nasir archaeological policy. Anything considered beautiful was usually destroyed by the Muntiari, claiming that it distracted worshippers from their duty to God. The five people in the room consisted of Sheik Aziz, his advisor Adaq, two guardsmen and the New Sobriun ambassador. The sheikh listened to the foreign dignitary, his expression gradually changing from joyous to sullen as he progressed in his narrative.

Though religious differences abounded between the nations, the two were more dependent on each other than any other two countries in four continents. The New Sobriuns provided the sheikh with the mercenaries and weapons to keep his position of power and, in exchange, the New Sobriuns were the Al-Rigarians primary receptor of Manaa. The strange purple rock known commonly as Manaa was necessary for all industry, for bending the forces of science and powering giant machines that could fashion clothing, weaponry and ships much faster than any human could wish to accomplish the task through hard work. It was the most important commodity in four continents and it was abundant in Rigar. Prior to its discovery there, Rigar had been a nomadic wasteland with very few inhabitants. For the past three

generations, the Manaa industry had stabilised the country and allowed the people to modernise and to earn the respect of their neighbours. However, the old religion of Nasir still reigned supreme amongst the people, an issue that was becoming ever-more prominent. Some Muntiari had attacked Sobriun officials visiting the sheikh in years gone by, many of them losing their lives in the process but seemingly more than willing to die for their religion. There were also other sects that wanted to put an end to the Manaa industry altogether.

“Can we confirm that these reports are true?” Adaq inquired of the New Sobriun representative.

“Yes, it has been confirmed by a source in Rubrumterra,” the bulbous New Sobriun replied.

“And what are the Rubrumterrans doing to manage the situation?” Aziz asked, finally contributing to the conversation.

“Currently that is unknown,” he smiled, obviously withholding everything that he knew. “But the situation is dire Sheikh Aziz. It needs to be addressed here as well as in Rubrumterra.”

A little annoyed by the dignitary's secretiveness, though not entirely unfamiliar with such blatant lying, the sheikh continued, "And what would you have me do?"

"Sheikh," Adaq interjected. "Shouldn't we discuss this matter in private?"

For the fourth time that day Aziz found himself smiling at his old friend. He was trying to wean more information from the dignitary by threatening to exclude him from proceedings. This ploy had worked many times in the past, but for such an important matter Aziz was reluctant to leave things to chance. "Not today," Aziz responded, "We have to agree upon a course of action at once."

The New Sobriun shifted his considerable weight in his chair, obviously pleased that proceedings favoured him and added to his ego. "We have men out looking," he said trying hard, yet failing not to sound smug.

This further annoyed Aziz. Al-Rigar was his kingdom, they were his people and yet the New Sobriuns did as they liked on Rigarian soil. The sheikh would be naive to believe that there weren't foreign agents in Al-Rigar, but this he did not like. "What do you mean?" he snapped.

Feeling a little intimidated by the monarch, the ambassador backtracked a little. “What I mean...your highness...is that with your permission,” he paused, grasping for the most polite way to frame the sentence. “I would like to send some New Sobriun mercenaries...who of course are under your complete command...to investigate the situation and to recover what has been taken.” A touch of crimson had crept into the man’s visage.

“As you wish,” Aziz responded dismissively. “This meeting is adjourned. You may leave now.” Without waiting for a response Aziz, closely followed by Adaq and the two guardsmen, exited the chamber via a side door and made his way toward the private royal quarters once more.“We will solve this ourselves,” Aziz informed his advisor.

Prince Henry made his way through the city with haste. He had just been informed of a critical situation that could plunge the four continents into war, one that Rubenterra couldn’t finance nor hope to win. He had headed out on horseback, a method of travel he disliked at the best of times but one made much more uncomfortable by the company that he currently had to endure. The page, who now wore the uniform of the Rubrumterran Marines, was riding alongside him.

His meeting with his father had been brief and had revealed to Henry two separate secrets. Firstly, the page sent to wake him this morning wasn't a page. He was a member of the Rubrumterran Intelligence Corps and worked closely with the New Sobriun representatives in the city. And a second revelation that Henry was finding difficult to digest at the moment. As head of the Rubrumterran Navy and a trusted member of the royal family, he had been charged with recovering what had been lost.

"We will take the Invincible," he informed the page. Then looking across, he realised that he didn't actually know the name of his riding companion. "What should I call you?" Henry enquired.

"I am Major Ajalasi," the young page replied whilst digging some dirt from beneath his fingernails, yet maintaining excellent control of his mount with his other hand. "But my family call me Paul."

Henry was well known for forgoing formality and calling sailors under his command by their first names, it was one of the reasons for his popularity amongst the rank and file. "Paul Ajalasi?" he remarked. "That isn't the most common of names in Rubrumterra."

A smile crept across Paul's face; he was beginning to appreciate the prince's company despite his suspicions. "My father came from the

Confederate...” he responded. The Confederate were a small cluster of city states in northern Rigar who had once been subjected to Rubrumterran rule during imperial times. More recently it had been the one area of the continent that had resisted Al-Rigarian expansion. “...and he married a Rubrumterran,” Paul finished.

“I see,” the prince replied. Having resolved the issue of what to call the intelligence officer, Henry returned the conversation to matters at hand. “We shall take the Invincible and be accompanied by seven Cutters,” Henry informed Paul. The Invincible was a large destroyer, the fastest and most modern ship in the fleet. It was also a power unto itself in the Anriac Bay, preventing piracy and any surrounding nations from testing the military might of the kingdom’s navy. Cutters were smaller ships, often used for scouting and relaying messages, but more than able to hold their own in large numbers. They were fast, agile and perfect for a chase at sea. The Rubrumterran Navy was the largest and best equipped in the Anriac Bay, the sole reason why the nation had not been absolved into a more powerful state and the reason why it was still considered a threat to others. “That way we won’t lose any time on our foes and can cover the most water. Once we find our pray, there shouldn’t be much of a fight.’

“Yes my lord.” Paul had to trust the prince’s judgement in nautical matters. Whilst he may be more knowledgeable in what was at stake, there wasn’t a finer naval commander in the entire kingdom. “But we must be careful when boarding,” Paul warned. “Whoever possesses the information may have learnt much already. And when you corner a rat...” Paul left the thought unfinished. He was frustrated. He should have known who had taken the document; it was his responsibility as head of the kingdom’s intelligence. But somebody had taken it and for quite some time he had remained ignorant of the fact. The thief had also killed several of his men, a deed that demanded vengeance.

The pair continued in their journey towards the wharf, both turning their minds to their respective tasks.

“We cannot leave this to chance!” Adaq exclaimed. Usually a stout supporter of the Rigarian’s relationship with New Sobrius, he was fully aware of the gravity of the situation. “If we don’t intervene, and leave it up to a bunch of hired swords, everything; and I mean everything that your brother, father and grandfather accomplished to build this nation will be lost!”

“Calm down Adaq,” the sheikh said. Various different solutions had already raced through his head, each one discounted as preposterous. The information available was just too valuable to be entrusted to anybody available.

“Do you know how valuable this city is?” Adaq pointed downwards, indicating Lunan, the capital city of Al-Rigar.

“Yes I’m more than aware,” replied Aziz calmly.

“The nations of Sobrius, New Sobrius and the Tsuki Empire would all do anything to control this city.” He sat down feeling a little exasperated after his outburst and the morning’s sword work. “They need our Manaa...whoever controls Lunan controls the Manaa!”

“Please Adaq,” Aziz was becoming a little annoyed with his advisor’s panic. “Don’t patronise me with the history of my own family. Let’s think of a plausible solution.”

“Your two half-brothers are both tied up at the Hiemian border and at The Great Wall. Neither would receive a message in time to respond. The rest of the army and the New Sobriun mercenaries are stopping the Confederate from raiding our western villages and Alfie is in Qahtani...” Adaq’s moment of

madness had come to an end and he was now resuming the usual role that Aziz had come to value him so highly for, “That only leaves...”

“Us,” Aziz interjected.

“Us?” Adaq echoed. The Royal Garrison in Lunan had been established to protect the autonomy of the monarchy, prevent uprisings and to act as muscle when disputes with the Muntiari arose. “It would leave the capital undefended,” he surmised.

“It would,” Aziz agreed with his advisor. “But what alternative do we have?”

Instantly Adaq sprung into action. He called forth the sheikh’s squire and three pages: there was no time to lose. “We will have to divide the garrison and appoint a regent in your absence,” he stated. “With a royal presence here and a large-ish force of soldiers to enforce your will, the Muntiari shouldn’t become too overambitious in our absence.” He paused. “We will have to be very quick,” he added as an afterthought.

“Rapid,” Aziz agreed. He walked over to the large window that overlooked the palatial grounds. Unlike the rest of the palace, the sheikh’s private quarters were elaborately decorated with tapestries, pottery and ornaments from distant lands. Though the Muntiari would disapprove of his

indulgences, exporting Manaa had made the royal family incredibly wealthy and they enjoyed taboos and vices that much of the population would never experience. Vanity was but one.

“I think two thousand men would be suitable to achieve the task at hand, which would leave the regent with...”Adaq was cut short by the sheikh.

“No.” Aziz said.

“No?” Adaq looked puzzled.

“We need to travel as swiftly as possible.” Aziz paused, deep in thought. “Bring only the Royal Guard.”

“But...” Adaq stuttered. “But that’s only a paltry force,” he exclaimed. “That is not a sufficient number to protect you!”

“However, it is a sufficient number to achieve the task at hand,” Aziz countered.

“But...” again Adaq was cut short by the sheikh.

“Make arrangements, but keep them as discreet as possible,” Aziz said. “I don’t wish to encounter any hostile forces along the way. I trust that the Muntiari have not become as bold as to attack their sheikh, but you can never

be certain.” He waited a moment, allowing his advisor to digest his plan before continuing, “and you will accompany me too Adaq.”

Resigned to his fate, Adaq was already making mental plans for the journey, “Page,” he bellowed.

- 3 –

The regal nobleman took out the scroll and began to read the first paragraph of the seemingly endless document. As he worked his way down the paper his eyes widened and he was unable to suppress the shudder that engulfed his body. He knew that the contents of this scroll would change the course of history.

Prince Henry took pride in personally overseeing the preparations that the Invincible made prior to setting sail. He meticulously paid attention to every detail from the supplies necessary to support the crew to the oiling of the anchor chain. He had learnt from an early age that preparation was

paramount in any voyage and this, coupled with his extensive nautical knowledge, had been the foundation of a brilliant naval career.

“Move the Ballistae towards the bow,” he commanded of several idle men. “If I know anything of sea chases,” and he did, “a few well placed missiles will be more than enough to persuade the crew to stop.” The men, though slightly older than their commanding officer, ran to complete the task. “Move the missiles starboard,” he then commanded of another group. “If we are forced to board I want a clear deck on the port side. That way we will force them to turn into the wind.” If the men doubted Henry’s knowledge of the wind direction several hundred miles away in the Anriac Bay, they didn’t show it. “Ah, first officer. Good to see you.” Henry greeted an approaching figure.

“Good day Captain,” the man replied. “Is everything in order aboard my ship?” he continued.

“Yes Mr. Baines,” Henry replied, ignoring the slight. Aidan Baines captained the Invincible whenever the prince wasn’t onboard the ship and seeing to royal affairs instead. When Henry did board the Invincible, he was relegated to the position of first officer and answered directly to the young royal. To all outward appearances he endured the relationship with good humour; nonetheless he still referred to the ship as his personal property. “I trust she didn’t sustain too much damage when you ran into those Tsuki

pirates last month Aidan." Henry was recounting an incident when Aidan had nearly sunk the Invincible a few months earlier. The old sailor had attempted to ram a pirate ship whilst it had been ablaze: a very unconventional tactic. Still, Aiden had proven reliable in the past and had a thirty year record without blemish. He was loyal; a personal friend of the king's, and was possibly the only other man in the world who possessed more knowledge of the Anriac Bay than the prince.

Aidan had the good grace to blush. "A slight oversight captain, I just wanted to see what she was really made of," he jested.

Henry laughed and continued issuing orders to the busy sailors. He was fully aware that they had to depart on this tide or they wouldn't overtake their quarry for the next two days.

Below decks Paul tried to piece together what intelligence he possessed and nothing seemed to make sense. The perpetrator must have been aided in stealing the scroll but by whom? His agents had appointed every servant and guardsmen who were detailed to the quarters where the scroll had been housed. The men who worked there were rotated in such a manner that an individual couldn't possibly have stolen the scroll alone. In fact, more than a dozen men would have had to been involved in the plot for an enlisted man to have taken the precious object and that was just implausible: he would have

found out before the theft had happened. Not only had Paul selected the employees himself, he also had agents posing as servants and guardsmen to inform him of such a scheme.

Who could it possibly have been? If it wasn't a servant, then the only other people who had access to the building were... Paul was more than aware of the severity of his train of thought. *If it wasn't a servant, then it must be a member of the royal family!* Suddenly the distinguished young admiral commanding the ship that was to carry them across the Anriac Bay no longer felt like such an asset. As Paul contemplated how to go about requesting the removal of the king's son from the captaincy of the Invincible, a deafening groan filled the air. It was the sound of wood scraping against wood as the rear of the ship slid along the jetty and the Invincible began her journey out to sea. For now Paul considered himself trapped, and at the mercy of one of the chief suspects in the most treasonous act in the history of the kingdom.

To the best of his ability Adaq had tried to let as few people learn of the sheikh's departure as possible. However, the provisions for the departure of one hundred men on horseback were considerable and it was only a matter of time before the people of Lunan realised that the sheikh hadn't been sighted for quite some time. Adaq and Aziz had waited until dusk to sneak out of the

city: most of the people of Lunan had been at prayer but neither had been naive enough to believe that the passage of over a hundred men on horseback had gone unnoticed. The pair just hoped that the fading light had been enough to conceal the identity of the party.

Adaq swore to himself. “I hate these beasts,” he confided in Aziz.

“You could always try to walk thirty miles a day,” Aziz responded sarcastically. “In fact, if you don’t hold your tongue, I may just order you to.”

Adaq’s aversion to riding was well known amongst those at court, “I may actually prefer that.”

The party had departed some time ago, choosing to travel during the night due to the harsh conditions of the desert landscape during the day. They had made good progress so far and were fast approaching the first oasis of many that they would have to visit on the way to their final destination. The first few rays of sunlight were breaking the horizon to silhouette the palm trees and fortifications of the Alnaizi Oasis.

“What a sight,” one of the guardsmen within earshot muttered to himself.

Aziz was forced to agree with the unknown soldier. The Alnaizi Oasis was more a living fortress than the beacon of hope for weary travellers that it had

once been during his grandfather's reign. A gigantic citadel, seven stories high rose into the atmosphere blocking most of the sun's rays from view. The central tower was not quite finished and even at this distance, it was evident that work was continuing night and day on the colossal structure. Blocks of stone the size of small houses were being levitated into place using nothing but the architects' minds and the bountiful supplies of Manaa to produce the energy. The sheikh always wondered how this was done as very few people possessed the ability to manipulate Manaa in this way. He knew that New Sobriun architects were aiding his Rigarian subjects in the construction of this fortress, but the use of Manaa as a constructive force still eluded Aziz. However, he had witnessed the destructive powers of Manaa on several occasions in the past.

"And why did we commission this monstrosity?" Adaq asked of Aziz.

"Wasn't it your suggestion?" Aziz responded instantaneously.

"Ah yes, but I had no idea that it would be this..."Adaq paused, trying to find the word to describe what he beheld.

"Grand?" supplied Aziz.

"Outrageous!" Adaq finally finished his sentence.

Aziz had to concede that his long-time companion was correct in his surmise: the citadel was gargantuan, dwarfing any fortification in Lunan. The pair were fully aware of the necessity of the undertaking and the importance of the Alnaizi Oasis to any campaign in the Kingdom of Al-Rigar. Ultimately, an army would not be able to reach the capital if they could not re-supply their troops with water at the oasis, making it a position of strategic importance and one that could never be lost to any enemy. During his grandfather's time, when the Kingdom of Al-Rigar had been in its infancy, his family had built the first wooden stockade there to gain control of the oasis and the Manaa mines of the capital city. If it wasn't for this quirk of fate and forward thinking by his grandfather, he wouldn't be sheikh and his family would most probably have been exiled to a nomadic existence in the Confederacy.

"Where shall we make camp?" Aziz asked the captain of the Royal Guards.

"On the other side of that dune," the captain replied, indicating a large rise in the sand to the west.

"Are you sure you wish to do this?" Adaq asked of Aziz. He was referring to their plan not to enter the citadel but to camp outside and send the captain, along with twenty other men, to refill their water bottles. It was a risky undertaking as bandits notoriously preyed upon travellers and caravans of

goods outside the safety of the walls, but it would allow the sheikh to conceal his departure from Lunan for a little longer.

“Nobody can know I’ve left just yet,” Aziz responded, “Once we’re three or four days out of Lunan we will become bolder. But for now it is best for me to keep a low profile.” He considered the fragile and violent nature of Al-Rigarian politics, “if word got back to Lunan now of my departure, ambitious Muntiari may pursue us, or they may try to take the capital.”

“Oh the joys of ruling,” Adaq mused as he directed his horse in the direction of the dune that they were to hide behind. He did not relish the idea of a sleeping on the hard ground, nor the insects that seemed to find him unreservedly delicious to feast upon.

The ships had fanned out across the Anriac Bay to cover more water. The Invincible had taken up position at the centre of the fleet with three cutters occupying the water between the huge vessel and the coastline and another four to the ship’s starboard side. Though the prince could only see two other ships, the lanterns of the closest cutters being visible either side of the Invincible, they were able to pass messages through a complex series of

flashing lights. The fleet was heading north into waters claimed by the Republic of Heim in pursuit of their prey.

“How are they finding things Aidan?” Henry asked of his first officer.

“Nothing just yet,” Aidan replied. He had just finished deciphering a message from the cutter on the port side of the Invincible. The prince had ordered all of the cutters to remain in constant contact with the royal flagship. “We’re only half a day out of Port. Should think it’d be another day or two before we catch them,” he added.

“Hmmm. Maybe longer if they try to hug the coast as closely as I think they will,” Henry mused. “Mr. Lamb,” he abruptly called out, “You have the deck.”

“I have the deck,” the second officer confirmed.

“I’m going to get some rest,” Henry informed the first and second officers. “I suspect we may catch our first glimpse of the traitors tomorrow and I want to be at my best.”

“Night captain,” Aidan murmured as Henry moved to leave the deck.

“Good night Aidan,” Henry said as he departed. He made his way toward the aft of the ship where the companionway led down to his spacious cabin. As

he strolled across the deck of the Invincible, the prince felt the odd sensation that he always felt when he was in close proximity to somebody manipulating Manaa. Looking up he noticed Paul in the Crow's Nest of the ship deep in meditation as a small purple mound of Manaa diminished next to him. Henry had always found the use of Manaa mystifying and had been an indifferent student of the craft as a child. He was able to perform some simple enchantments; such as generating gusts of wind and the ability to navigate at night, but found the process exhausting and would only resort to the unnatural trade at times of great need. Very few people in The Four Continents were able users of Manaa and most could do little more than start a fire or repair a hole in the roof. The exuberant price of Manaa in Rubrumterra meant that few people ever experienced the opportunity to practice the craft; it was something that remained the privilege of the nobility and military. Having had ample schooling in the technique as a young man, the prince thought he recognised Paul's spell as one of location: extending his senses vast distances until he touched upon his intended target. Henry continued down the companionway and out of sight.

Paul reached out further than he ever had before. Vast tentacles of energy crossed the grand expanses of open water encountering nothing but

the endless sea. The energies he conveyed were a part of himself, the very fibres of his mind and, as such, he had to be ready to withdraw them at a moment's notice. Should his intended target prove to be a more able practioner of the craft, he could easily be rendered mad or killed by the adversary. The fragility and complexion of the human mind fascinated Paul more than anything in life. He had touched a thousand minds whilst carrying out tasks on behalf of the crown and no two had been the same.

Suddenly, Paul felt something; a sensation of another's presence. Discreetly Paul entered their consciousness.

"God this is hard work," the individual thought to himself.

The man was completing a laborious task, one that was both taxing and monotonous. The individual was a menial, perhaps a deckhand or a mercenary, ideal for gathering intelligence from. A superior mind would have felt Paul's presence immediately and closed their thoughts to his probing or they would have attacked his consciousness if they had possessed the skill.

"Ahh," the man cursed as he caught his finger on something sharp. Paul felt the pain too. "That's the second time in an hour!" the man spoke to nobody in particular.

Paul slipped further into the man's consciousness, reliving his memories and experiencing his emotions from earlier in the day. He experienced the man performing the same particular chore that he was carrying out now, though the sun was high in the sky and the ship was moored to a jetty. Abruptly the man stopped in his task, something had caught his attention, a welcome distraction from the task at hand. A stranger had come on board the ship to be greeted by the prestigious guest who was staying below decks. Thus far the simple sailor had been unable to glean the man's identity, but from the quality of his dress and the deference that he received from the captain it was clear that he was a man of importance. He saw the newcomer pass something to the man staying onboard following a brief conversation between the two. The nobleman inspected what had appeared to be a scroll and then something petrifying had happened. Three men, at the bequest of their leader, had murdered the newcomer and tossed him overboard...

Paul's strength was waning and he saw no advantage in reliving the simpleton's recollection of events; he had witnessed enough. Withdrawing the tentacles of energy back into his body, Paul felt dazed and exhausted yet incredibly satisfied with his efforts. Lacking the vigour or willpower to return to his cabin immediately, he passed out on the floor of the Crow's Nest.

In the early hours and under the cover of darkness, the traitor took the opportunity presented to him. He slipped into the intelligence officer's tiny cabin hoping to find what he was looking for. Knowing the kingdom's intelligence procedures intimately and having a received a little espionage training himself during his schooling, he was confident that he could find anything that Paul had hidden in his cabin. He began by knocking the panels around the cabin, trying to find a hollow wall or a hiding place that had been carefully concealed. As he undertook the monotonous task his mind turned to the stroke of luck that had allowed him this opportunity. Earlier that night he had been out on deck and had observed the intelligence officer's exertions in trying to locate his true master, and then he had watched as Paul passed out from the effort. Knowing that Paul may be hiding vital information in his quarters, he had seized the opportunity and made his way to the cabin as quickly and as stealthily as possible. He estimated that he had ten minutes before Paul regained consciousness and made his way back to his abode.

The captain of the Sheikh's Royal Guards had returned from the citadel with fresh supplies and drinking water just as the sun had fully cleared the horizon. In the time he had taken to make the short journey Aziz, Adaq, and the remaining guardsmen had erected the tents in a defensible position on the far side of the dune. The party now slumbered during the extreme heat of the Rigarian desert.

"Stand to," one of the sentries called out.

The camp was a sudden flurry of activity as men rushed to don armour, gather weapons and report to their superior. In less than a minute the soldiers were organised and prepared for battle, a possibility that wasn't overly unimaginable.

"Report," Aziz commanded the captain of the company.

"They look like Al-Rigarian regulars," the captain replied. As he spoke, he didn't take his eyes from the force which was now assembling at the top of the dune that they were hidden behind. "Approximately three hundred highness," he added. He was referring to the number of the enemy.

Outmanoeuvred and outnumbered, the sheikh knew that this was a fight that he couldn't win using traditional methods. Adaq had had secured a deposit of Manaa against such a possibility, though was reluctant to unleash

such a powerful attack against his own forces. The Al-Rigarian regulars were, after all, subjects of the crown.

As the soldiers at the top of the dune finished assembling into battle formation, two mounted riders began to descend the dune. One was obviously the commander of the force; probably a captain or a major, the other, to the Aziz's surprise, was a woman. Not an overly common sight in Al-Rigar, women were usually condemned to a life of servitude and, after marriage, were not allowed to show their faces in public. A tiny handful of single women had risen to positions of importance within the Kingdom and Aziz knew them all. As she approached, Aziz couldn't help but smile.

Finally reaching hailing distance the army officer accompanying the women called out, "Who goes there?"

"Weary travellers seeking rest and shelter from the sun," Adaq responded formally on behalf of the party. "We seek no quarrel. Have we caused grievance in our simple request?"

"No, we are merely curious why such a heavily armed band chooses not to accept the hospitality of our noble lady," the army officer retorted. It was a politely worded inquiry as to why the party had attempted to keep their passage a secret.

“We long for privacy, is that not a simple request?” Adaq countered.

The women, covered in a veil that only revealed her face, shifted her focus from Adaq and now beheld Sheikh Aziz with alert eyes. “Is there any reason why such illustrious travellers would not consider paying homage to me on their passage northwards?”

The game was up. “Terribly sorry for the oversight my lady,” Aziz finally joined the conversation. “Would the fine lady accept my humble apology?”

“Only if the sheikh would consider accepting my hospitality. The new citadel is really quite fine and I wouldn’t want the sheikh to think he is wasting gold from the Royal Coffers.”

At the mention of Aziz’s rank the army officer’s manner changed instantaneously. He bowed his head in deference to the sheikh, his lord and master. Obviously the conversation had carried to the men assembled at the top of the dune; they all sheathed their swords in unison and dropped to one knee, bowing their heads.

“It would be a pleasure my lady,” Aziz retorted.

“Excellent. Would his highness care for a steed?” The lady became more formal in speech, realising that the assembled rank and file could overhear their conversation.

As a horse was brought down from the dune for Aziz, the captain of the Royal Guard barked out a command, ‘Break camp!”

Once more the camp was a flurry of activity.

Paul regained consciousness slowly: he was disorientated and exhausted. Looking around the Crow’s Nest to gain his bearings he realised that he had vomited during his coma. He knew that he had exerted himself beyond his training but it had been necessary to confirm the location of his prey. He was alarmed to see the sun in the sky and assumed, from its position, that he had remained unconscious for several hours. Shakily, he descended from the Crow’s Nest towards the deck; eager to clean the vomit from his tunic and to fill his empty stomach.

As his feet touched the deck he was greeted by Prince Henry. “We were concerned for your wellbeing Paul,” he said.

“You knew I was up there?” The spy was alarmed that he had been so easily observed.

“Yes,” the prince seemed happy at the spy’s discomfort. “I can always sense the manipulation of Manaa,” he added.

“You knew what I was doing?” Paul seemed openly shocked.

“Yes. Did you have any luck?” Henry inquired about the spell’s success. “And are you feeling ok?” he added as an afterthought.

Dodging the question, Paul started his own line of enquiry, “Why didn’t you revive me?” he asked. “I must have been out for hours!”

“My tutors told me that a man in such a fragile condition should be allowed time to rest after such an undertaking,” Henry snapped. “And I would appreciate it if you remembered your place major.” Henry emphasised the man’s rank. He didn’t like the tone of voice that Paul had adopted.

“A thousand apologies captain,” was Paul’s instant response. “The effort has wholly exhausted me,” he continued. “May I be excused to make myself more presentable highness?”

“Yes,” replied Henry. “Once you have given Aidan the exact location of our target.” Paul’s attempt to avoid Henry’s enquiry had not been lost on the prince.

“Of course captain,” Paul responded. He knew that they had to overtake the enemy ship eventually or the scroll would be lost forever, he just wanted time to formulate a plan for when the moment came.

“Dismissed,” Henry smiled and left the spy to his own devices. The prince assumed the man’s manner was a direct result of the phenomenal effort he had produced the previous night. Henry was more than aware that a spell of that magnitude usually required the minds of three or four men and that there were only a handful of people who could hope to achieve the feat that Paul had. Henry’s trail of thought turned to the task at hand, realising that their prey should come within sight by evening.

Making his way towards his tiny cabin, Paul considered the events that had unfolded thus far. He knew a member of the royal family must have cooperated with the thief for them to have been successful. He thought that Henry’s miraculous appearance when he had revived had been more than a coincidence; he must have been watching him. *Would the prince have allowed me to choke on my own vomit?* he mused. He had also been struck by the prince’s line of enquiry when they had met: the prince had only been interested in the location of the other ship, not concerned in any way about his wellbeing. *But what would he have to gain by betraying his father?* The question that bothered Paul the most was unavoidable. Prince Henry was third in line to the crown, after his uncle and elder brother. Henry’s ambition was notorious in court, though it had always been an ambition to further

Rubrumterra's holdings and to return the nation to the imperial powerhouse that it had once been.

The answer to his question was overwhelmingly obvious but Paul did not want to believe it. *It can't be,* he thought to himself, *it just can't.* If Prince Henry had aided in the theft of the scroll, it would be the first case of a royal committing treason in over a millennia. He considered that Henry may have made a deal with a foreign power whereby he would inherit the throne after those before him in the line of succession lost their lives during a lengthy campaign. He could then strike a deal with the foreign power granting him sovereignty over a greater area of the continent. It was a possibility, but one that would reap terrible consequences for the Kingdom and the monarchy itself.

- 5 -

A huge camel, the beast of burden in the Rigarian desert, took pride of place in the centre of the table. Adaq was convinced that the animal had simply wondered into the impressive banquet hall and fallen asleep in the most inconvenient of places. However, on closer inspection he discovered that

the bulky animal was to be served as dinner for the assembled guests. The animal had been cooked whole, a monumental task considering the beast's size, and then the skin had been returned to the cooked meat. The attention to detail was meticulous; the eyelashes had been returned to their original position, the tongue peeked through the camel's lips and even the tail had been reattached.

Despite the huge feast laid out for the sheikh and his party, most of the men's eyes were fixed on Shahad. An unusual sight in Rigar, the noblewoman wore a beautiful green dress that clung to every curve of her body. The emerald dress was interlaced by woven gold and was adorned by priceless gems that caught the light of the thousand torches lit to illuminate the vast hall. Though she still modestly covered her hands and legs, the only visible flesh being her face, the young ruler of the citadel looked beautiful in her own right. Such garb was considered scandalous by Rigarian standards but in many courts outside of the kingdom would be measured as quite conservative.

"I'm afraid that we must depart at sunset," Sheikh Aziz said apologetically to the noble woman. "We travel with the upmost urgency Shahad," He informed her.

Shahad, the leader of another tribe loyal to the sheikh had risen to prominence following her late father's death. She had been entrusted with

constructing the citadel at the oasis and guarding the vital location from potential aggressors. Though Al-Rigar had enjoyed a period of peace for the past generation, it was not unconceivable that a usurper would stake a claim on the throne in Lunan and the royal family had to maintain constant vigilance. Only trusted subjects, such as Shahad, were awarded positions of such importance.

“You do me a great dishonour your highness,” she quipped. “After all the effort my kitchen staff have gone through to prepare such a feast.” She was clearly joking.

“We must leave as soon as travel becomes possible,” the sheikh put an end to the topic.

“And why were you poking around in the desert?” Shahad could no longer withhold the question.

“This way.” Aziz led Shahad away from the prized animal and toward an uninhabited alcove of the banquet hall. “Ensure that we aren’t disturbed,” he ordered a pair of Shahad’s Al-Rigarian regulars. The men took up positions either side of the alcove, barring the way to anybody who tried to enter.

“Do you remember history class at the palace in Lunan?” the sheikh asked. He was referring to the school that all noble men and women attended in the capital prior to taking positions of power.

Shahad nodded. As was custom with the Rigarians, men and women were separated after puberty never to see one another again. However, the two had been close friends during their infancy and early childhood and had then contrived to see one another in secret afterwards. “How could I forget Aziz?”

“Do you remember the story of the Old Empire? Those who once ruled all of Rigar and Sobrius before the coming of the light?” Aziz referred to a time prior to the founding of the Nasir religion.

Again Shahad nodded. She knew the stories of the Old Empire, a people who worshipped multiple gods and who had grown in such power that they had ruled two continents. The people had built remarkable structures through their manipulation of Manaa, some that still stood today.

“They knew more about Manaa than we could ever hope to learn in a century. They built buildings that dwarfed this citadel, nobody could stand in their way on the battlefield and their empire held strong for a thousand years,”

he said. All the time he spoke he regretted that he couldn't stay longer in the regal woman's company. "They wielded great power," he concluded.

"This is all known to me," she replied. "Ultimately a pretender went to war with the Emperor and they dwindled into obscurity," she concluded his rudimentary lesson for him. She too was feeling drawn to the sheikh, somebody she hadn't spent time with for far too long.

"They..." he paused, "They knew how to do terrible things," he finished abruptly. "They could rip The Great Wall from its foundations, summon a tidal wave capable of destroying all Rubrumterra, atomising this citadel in seconds..." he left the thought unfinished. "And this information was not lost."

Shahad's eyes grew wide, "The Tabula has been found?" she asked rhetorically. The Tabula was a fabled document that the people of the Old Empire had recorded their knowledge of Manaa in: many people had searched for the scroll but the majority of the populace considered it to be a myth.

"It was found long ago," Aziz alleged. "When the Rubrumterran Empire was at its height, they recovered the document from the ancient city in Malpasse."

"What?" Shahad seemed animated. "Why didn't they use the knowledge?"

“They were afraid,” Aziz deduced. “Knowledge from the document has been used in recent times though. Only once,” he added.

“The New Sobriuns?” Shahad guessed, “To end the war?” Shahad referred to the war that had engulfed all Sobrius and New Sobrius three generations earlier. The fighting had even spread into the continent of Rigar and the Tsuki Empire. The war had come to an abrupt end when New Sobriun forces had wiped two cities in Heim from the face of the planet. The loss of life had been incalculable and it had been condemned as a heinous act. However, it had served its purpose of bringing the six year conflict to an end.

Aziz nodded to confirm her assumption. “In their desperation the Rubrumterrans had shared the knowledge with their former colony. They also possess a copy of the Tabula,” he added.

“So who has the Tabula now?” she asked Aziz. “And where are you going?”

Paul was deep in thought when he heard footsteps approaching him. Instinctively his hand rested on the hilt of one of the many dirks that he kept secreted about his person. To call his upbringing rough would be an understatement and the impulse had been born out of habit. Seeing that it was

Aidan, the ship's first officer, he relaxed, "How goes it sir?" he inquired politely.

"Fine Major," Aidan replied politely. "And what brings you out on deck?" he asked.

"Just the whole situation..." he hesitated. "...nothing makes sense."

"How do you mean major?" Aidan shifted uncomfortably.

Paul knew Aidan better than he knew himself having been employed to scrutinise every military officer in Rubrumterra. He knew of his long-lasting friendship with the King, an outcome of their time spent together at the Royal Naval Academy, his long and proud history as a naval officer and even his mistress. The man was a conservative military officer who enjoyed nothing more than a stiff drink and a game of cards after a week at sea.

"It's just impossible..." Paul trailed off. He was tired and embarrassed that his security had been so easily breached.

"Does this have anything to do with our hurried mission?" Aidan asked.

"Yes..." Paul answer, not revealing anything. "It just had to involve somebody important and I don't know who."

“There are lots of important people in Rubrumterra...merchants, nobles, the army...” he tailed off.

“No,” Paul snapped. “This was somebody *very* important...somebody who knows everything and has friends in high places.

“Like a royal?” the first officer was beginning to understand Paul’s train of thought.

“Yes but which one?” Paul asked, more speaking to himself than to the spy.

“There were only two in Partallow when we left,” Aidan observed. “And one of those was deathly ill in bed.” Aidan finished the notion by turning and heading toward the companionway and his bunk. “Which leaves only...” he left the thought unfinished.

“Henry,” the spy whispered to himself.

The nobleman was frustrated. He was an able manipulator of Manaa, one of the best his people possessed, yet he struggled to decrypt the Tabula and to unlock its secrets. He had only managed to perform one simple

manipulation of Manaa but the other larger spells remained a mystery to him: he could barely comprehend the theory.

He knew that with time and the aid of his peers he would be able to perform great feats that hadn't been seen in the Four Continents for a thousand years. The thought calmed him.

Paul had reached out with his mind once more; although this time he only touched the sailor's consciousness in order to locate the ship that they pursued. He had consulted with Aidan, the first officer, and the man had made a slight alteration to the ship's course. A signal had been passed to the surrounding cutters by Henry and they had slowly fallen in behind the Invincible, ready to surround their prey at a moment's notice.

Paul was joined by Henry. "Only an hour or so until we see them now," he said.

The spy was still wary of Henry. A process of elimination had resulted in the prince being one of very few suspects with both the motivation and the means to help steal the Tabula, "How will we go about this?" Paul was sure that Henry wouldn't reveal his true plan but it was all he could do for now. He was planning to secure the Tabula himself and then make for the mainland

having commandeered one of the smaller cutters during the mayhem of the encounter.

“It will be simple enough,” Henry said. “We will send one or two of the cutters ahead to block their escape. Then we will come alongside and board her. The fighting will probably be hectic but short.” He took reprieve of the situation for a moment. “If needs be one of the cutters will board from the other side. We will have the numbers,” he concluded.

A sound enough plan, Paul thought to himself. “And...”

“Sail ahoy!” A lookout called, interrupting the spy midsentence.

“Where to?” Prince Henry responded.

“One point off the starboard bow,” the response came.

Henry rushed to the front of the ship, simultaneously pulling a looking glass from the inside of his heavy tunic. “Aye,” he confirmed that he had heard the look out’s final call.

With his naked eye he could make out four grey smudges on the horizon, unfurling the looking glass from its leather case he took a closer look.

Henry frowned. “Is that our ship?” he asked Paul.

Paul briefly reached out with his mind for the third time in less than a day. After a short moment of time he felt the familiar consciousness of the sailor he had encountered the night before. Withdrawing into himself he answered Henry, “Yes captain,” realising that he had spent the last of his Manaa supply. “It is,” he confirmed. Reaching into the pocket of his tunic he was met only by the black dust that had once been his ample supply of Manaa. He no longer possessed any of the purple rock, but was aware of a supply locked away in the stronghold of the Invincible. If they were attacked by magical means, he would be able to protect the fleet.

Henry swore to under his breath. “There are four of them,” he whispered to himself. He was joined by Aidan, his first officer. “One large destroyer and three smaller frigates,” he informed his subordinate. “We have to take the destroyer, what we are looking for will surely be on board. The cutters will be more than a match for the frigates but this could get messy, I was only expecting one.”

“We’ve handled worse in the past captain,” Aidan reassured the younger man.

“I know,” replied Aidan. “But they can’t get away. If needs be I’ll lash the two ships together and burn them to the waterline.”

“If needs be...” Aidan was clearly worried by the prospect. “But let’s just take her the old fashioned way. That way we can all be back in a tavern this time tomorrow.”

Henry smiled. Though the relationship had occasionally felt strained in the past due to Henry’s continual insistence that he captained the Invincible, there was no calmer sailor in the entire Anriac Bay than Aidan. “We will be on them within the hour,” the prince concluded. “We should make ready.”

“To arms,” Aidan relayed the order.

Instantaneously a drum roll was sounded by a sergeant of the Royal Marines and sailors and marines alike rushed to pre-allocated positions around the ship. The marines drew their bows, ready to rain arrows onto the deck of the enemy ships and the sailors armed themselves with cutlasses and other short swords, ready to board at a moment’s notice.

The man was struggling to understand the complexity of the spells. He had always enjoyed an excellent grasp of the theory of Manaa manipulation

but had often struggled to put his theoretical knowledge to practice. However, he found some of what he read baffling; it was far more advanced than anything he had studied during his lifetime.

“Sail ahoy,” his silence was interrupted by the look out’s voice carrying below decks.

Following a flurry of activity there was a tentative knock at the door of the man’s cabin. The man rose, opened the door and was addressed by a scared looking sailor. The two briefly spoke and, after taking a moment to consider the situation, the nobleman followed the sailor out of his cabin to the deck of the ship.

“Why do you disturb my solace captain?” he demanded of the naval officer. Though the captain was commanding the sailors aboard the ship, there was no doubt in either of the men’s mind as to who decided on the larger scheme.

“Sorry my lord,” the captain apologised. “But we have guests,” he said.

The nobleman turned to see the direction that the captain had indicated. In the brilliant sunshine of the late afternoon sky, several small sails

and one large one were clearly visible to the rear of the ship. “Can we outrun them before nightfall?” the nobleman asked.

“No my lord,” the captain replied.

“So what do you advise captain?” The nobleman was becoming annoyed with the captain. His mission was of utmost importance and this interruption was interfering with his research.

“We have two options my lord,” the Captain said. He could sense the growing frustration of the nobleman and would do anything to avoid his wrath. “We could continue to run and allow them to catch us, though this would give them the advantage.”

“Or...” the nobleman prompted.

“Or,” the captain continued. “We could turn and fight them here. They may have the numbers but we have the superior ships. If we could...”

“Is there any reason why I was interrupted for such trivial matters?” the nobleman interjected, his anger rising.

“Well...” the captain started tentatively. “If you could perhaps help...” he continued. “Their cutters would be useless if it wasn’t for the Invincible.”

“This shall all be conveyed in my report captain,” the nobleman informed the captain. “That I should be required to do *your* job for you.”

“But...” the captain attempted to explain the impossibility of the situation that he found himself in.

“Silence!” the nobleman cut the captain off.

It was evident that the nobleman was in a trance and that powers were at play that neither the captain nor the sailors understood. The captain was aware of the huge quantity of Manaa that had been stowed below decks by the nobleman’s servants when he had come aboard the ship and he suspected that he was now drawing on the power provided by the odd purple rock. Abruptly the nobleman raised his arms and a gigantic fireball, the size of a small house, flew directly upwards towards the sky. The nobleman then threw his arms forwards, directing the fireball towards the largest sail in the fleet. It accelerated faster and faster and also grew in size as it travelled across the empty expanse of the water. It would consume its intended target in flame, killing everybody on board; the captain considered that nothing would survive the impact.

Aziz was reluctant to leave Shahad behind. He was still unwed and though he was entitled to take multiple wives, he did hold to the ideal that he would only marry one woman. His idealism had often been the subject of Adaq's humour as it was highly unusual for a nobleman to enforce such restrictions on themselves. Adaq already had three wives and was wooing several young women at court.

As the sun slowly sank behind the silhouette of the enormous citadel, the party made its way northwards across the vast plains of the Rigarian desert. The sheikh's visit to the citadel had been widely publicised and the banquet held in his honour had been attended by anyone of importance abiding by the oasis; any attempt of departing covertly was abandoned by Aziz and Adaq. Shahad had despatched five hundred men to accompany original Aziz's party for the first two days of their journey. This way any agents residing in the citadel would inform their masters that the sheikh's entourage consisted of several hundred, not the true number, giving them an advantage once Shahad's forces returned to the citadel.

Adaq could faintly hear the churches of the Nasir calling their followers to the final prayer of the day. "Shall we stop to pray?" Adaq quipped. The advisor had found departing from Shahad's court exceedingly difficult. As such, the court consisted primarily of bureaucrats and military personal; the

Muntiari were yet to establish a presence there and he found the citadel a remarkably liberal place by Rigarian standards. He had also spied several young ladies travelling unescorted through the streets of the vast complex.

“Do you wish to?” Aziz retorted.

Both men were fully aware that they weren’t obliged to perform religious rites when attending to urgent matters of state. The religious doctrine had been implemented generations ago when the Sobriuns had crusaded against all of Rigar. However, recent interpretation of the dogma had caused much friction between the monarchy and the Muntiari.

“I would rather continue for now,” he replied. “But after an hour or two I may take you up on that offer,” he said whilst rubbing his backside in an exaggerated manner. It was no secret that Adaq was an indifferent horseman.

Aziz and all those within earshot laughed out loud in genuine amusement.

The sound of laughter carried across the vast empty plains of the Rigarian desert without obstruction. A lone figure, clad in the traditional red-yellow clothing adopted by the nomadic tribes of the Rigarian desert was barely visible against the similarly coloured dunes. The pursuer had been

successful in avoiding detection during the fading light of late evening and now that nightfall was falling, was completely invisible to the human eye. Moving stealthily, the pursuer advanced cautiously in the direction of the merriment.

The crew of the Invincible watched in muted horror as the gargantuan fireball flew towards them at alarming speed. The heat emanating from the giant crimson meteor was unbearable, filling the prince's nostrils with the stench of charred human hair despite the fireball being over two hundred yards away. Henry had never considered his life's work before but as the sphere of death hurtled towards them he measured the past thirty four years with disdain.

The ball was now only a hundred yards away and the heat was becoming unbearable. The crew of the Invincible were still too petrified to act; much like a frightened animal accepting its fate. Closer still the ball hurtled, forcing the assembled sailors to close their eyes, an instinctive survival reflex of the human psyche.

When the ball was mere yards away it changed course viciously as if striking an invisible barrier and engulfed the nearest cutter in flame, killing everybody aboard instantly. Simultaneously Paul was violently thrown

backwards across the deck of the ship, crashing hard into the railings that circumnavigated the vessel. As yellow, orange and red flame danced across what remained of the small cutter, Paul lost consciousness and fell overboard.

“Man overboard,” the second officer barked.

Only two men other than Henry and the second officer had remained standing; the other sailors had collapsed or were being propped up by the sides of cabins, ballistae and other objects on deck. Whilst four men held fast, other members of the crew tried to come to terms with what they had just witnessed.

The prince quickly took heed of circumstances, realising that Paul had drawn upon the Manaa stored below the decks of the enemy ship to deflect the fiery missile. Having conjured several incantations already that day he must have miscalculated the undertaking and taken the full brunt of the velocity of the missile himself. Henry looked across at the burning cutter, realising that not a soul had survived the impact and the issue of a rescue mission was superfluous. “Do you have him Mr. Lamb?” he asked of the second officer.

“Nearly captain,” the second officer replied. “Briggs and Moriarty have just managed to get the Lifebuoy over his head.”

“Is he ok?” Henry asked.

“Can’t tell now captain.” the response came. “Lucky bugger landed on his back. He won’t have drowned,” the old sailor added.

“Ok, when he’s up get him to his cabin,” Henry had taken control of the situation. “You stay with him Mr. Lamb,” Henry ordered the second officer.

The prince was pleased that at least three men had managed to gain their wits after the terrible sight. He was loath to see that several men were in tears and that some had even fainted on the deck of the Invincible. The others were experiencing a mixture of terror, after watching a huge burning ball of flame nearly end their existence and joy, when they realised that they had survived the ordeal. More than one man had soiled himself.

“He’s conscious,” the second officer reported.

“Good work Mr. Lamb,” Henry praised offhandedly. “Take him below and stay with him,” Henry ordered.

“But...” Paul began to protest to the order.

“You will go to your cabin and rest under the care of Mr. Lamb,” Henry informed Paul. The chaos of the situation was trying his temper and the prince was unaccustomed to having his orders questioned. “This would be the second time that I have to remind you of your place Major,” Henry was angry, “I hope

there won't be a third!" Turning to the second officer, Henry gave him his orders. "If needs be, bar the door."

"Aye sir," the second officer replied as he dragged the half-conscious spy down the companionway.

Trying to hide his own emotions and to exert a semblance of authority in the disarray that surrounded him, Henry realised the worst. In the mayhem that had followed the fireball and Paul being thrown overboard, the four ships that they had previously pursued had changed course. Now the four enemy vessels were bearing down on Henry's fleet. The six remaining cutters had been sporadically scattered by the impact of the fireball and the fleet was no longer organised to commence battle. The men on board the Invincible were anything but ready to fight and his first officer was nowhere in sight.

As Henry tried to ready his men, the enemy destroyer launched a ballista missile high into the air and in the direction of Henry's fleet.

The sheikh's entourage had made good ground during the night and the period had passed uneventfully bar one encounter with a caravan. The leader of the caravan had thought the sheikh's soldiers a group of raiders, organising his column into a defensive formation only for the band of heavily armed men

to ride past the waiting mercenaries employed to guard their master's goods against outlaws without incident.

"May I ask a question?" Adaq asked Aziz.

"Of course," Aziz was expecting a quip.

"Why are we heading to The Great Wall?" Adaq asked.

The simplicity and directness of the question caught Aziz off-guard. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Anybody could have taken the Tabula," Adaq mused. "And why did they have to make off with it? They may have just hidden it somewhere and planned to recover it later," he added.

Aziz considered his response, looking around to ensure that nobody was listening to their conversation as he spoke, "It just makes sense."

"How?" Adaq responded.

"It couldn't have been Heim or Malpasse," Aziz deduced. "They don't have the resources to carry out such an operation. Also, they are both engaged in wars at the moment." Aziz was referring to the continual skirmishes that took place along both of Heim's borders and one on Malpasse's boundaries.

“They’re far too preoccupied and are not close enough with the Rubrumterrans to know that they possessed the Tabula.”

“The New Sobriuns?” Adaq asked.

“They already possess the knowledge,” Aziz responded, “And they have a ‘special relationship’ with the Rubrumterrans.” Aziz chuckled.

“So we presume that it’s the Tsukese?” Adaq echoed what they had been told by the New Sobriun ambassador days earlier.

“You were thinking something different?” Aziz asked. He felt a little uncomfortable with this line of questioning; however Adaq’s keen mind had saved his rule more than once.

“What if it was a Rigarian?” he asked.

“That’s preposterous!” Aziz could not believe his ears. “I would have known about such an attempt.”

“Would you?” Adaq asked.

“Of course,” the sheikh snorted. “If Al-Rigar had seen fit to steal the Tabula, I would have been informed,” he said, “I would have issued the order!”

“But what if the plot had been hatched elsewhere? What if it doesn’t come from within the government?” Adaq implied. “The monarchy has many enemies amongst the other tribes.”

“But they couldn’t,” Aziz sounded unsure. “They don’t have the influence in the Rubrumterran court.”

“Don’t they?” Both men were fully aware that members of minor tribes were often sent to Rubrumterra to act as representatives of Al-Rigar. It was a position of inconsequence as the Rubrumterran ambassador in Lunan personally saw to all matters of trade between the two countries and diplomatic relations were stable. However, it often proved beneficial to send the leaders of minor tribes to the Rubrumterran court as it massaged the ego of would-be rebellious factions in Al-Rigar.

“No,” Aziz concluded. “If I didn’t know of the Tabula’s reappearance then they certainly didn’t”

“Manaa trade has made many tribes who once opposed the monarchy incredibly wealthy,” Adaq countered. “They would possess the funding for such an undertaking.”

“But how could they know of its existence?” Aziz was finding it difficult to grasp his old friend’s theory.

“You know Rubrumterran nobles,” Adaq said, drawing on a false stereotype. “Boasting to a woman of pleasure, drinking themselves into stupors, broke...” he left the thought unfinished. Adaq and Aziz knew the Muntiari’s interpretation of Sobriun living was far from the truth. The pair had both visited the island Kingdom as young men and, having come from a land where inter-gender interaction was forbidden out of wedlock and alcohol was prohibited, found that they quite enjoyed that way of life. The Muntiari had seized on the Sobriun’s decadent ways however, blaming it for the continent’s demise as a world power.

“You think Adalella or Durki could be behind this?” The two tribesmen that he referred to were both currently touring Rubrumterra on behalf of Al-Rigar. They were of different tribes, both of which had opposed Aziz’s grandfather when he had seized power. Their families had surrendered to the monarchy under the condition that they kept half of their ancestral lands and were given positions at court. Aziz’s grandfather had been too busy beating back the Confederacy at the time and, unwilling to slaughter his own people, had accepted their surrender. Both tribes had prospered greatly since the treaty and were key exporters of Manaa to New Sobrius. They had also fostered much support from the Muntiari. “They are idiots!” Aziz said.

“I agree,” replied Adaq. “But they are wealthy idiots.”

“Yes they are,” Aziz agreed.

“Wealthy enough to buy the loyalty of a Rubrumterran noble?” Adaq suggested.

“Yes they are,” Aziz conceded.

The nobleman was frustrated by the delay and tired from conjuring the fireball. He was also frustrated by the way his missile had been deflected from its intended target at the last moment. He knew that the individual who had attempted to avert the fireball had most probably paid with their life and this brought him a little comfort. The captain of the ship had assured him that their pursuers would make easy prey now that they were disorganised and had lost a ship already. Turning his mind aside from such trivial matters he continued inspecting the Tabula.

Paul was exhausted but he knew that the Tabula was within reach. Just before the second officer had hauled him down the companionway to his cabin, he had seen the four enemy ships turn to attack. He had every faith in his abilities despite his feeble condition and he knew that he could board the enemy destroyer during the fracas and steal the scroll. He would then use his

considerable skills and experience as a spy to sneak aboard a cutter and make for Rubrumterra. As he rolled over in his bunk, sending two mice who shared his accommodation scurrying, he whispered a simple sentence. Instantly he heard a dull thud as the second officer collapsed in a heap. Usually Paul would have killed the man but he had just saved him from drowning.

“Our debt is settled,” he said to the unconscious man as he began to strip the second officer of his clothing. He needed a disguise.

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The first two enemy ships closed on the cutter that had been thrown the furthest from the others by the blast. The remaining two enemy ships, one of which was the destroyer containing the scroll, reined ballistae and arrows in the direction of Henry’s remaining ships.

The prince considered the position quickly, his nautical knowledge and experience paying dividends in a situation where lesser men would have panicked. He knew the cutter could be saved but it would probably cost him another two as they came within range of the projectiles from all four ships. A plan formulated in Henry’s mind.

“Seaman,” he turned to the Invincible’s signalman who had finally gained his bearings after the fireball. “Relay to that cutter there,” he pointed to a ship on their starboard side, “and that cutter there,” he indicated the vessel on their port side, “to take up flanking positions.” Turning to the Invincible’s reserve signalman he said, “Seaman, relay to the others to fill in behind us.”

The two went about their business ably as he began giving orders to the other sailors on deck. He planned to ram the enemy destroyer and sink its escort, allowing him to board the destroyer whilst the other two frigates were still dealing with the solitary cutter. He regretted leaving the vessel to fend for itself but knew that the men of the Royal Navy accepted this possibility when they enlisted.

The Invincible gained momentum and Henry was forced to duck behind the helm as enemy archers swept the deck of his ship. However, they were answered by a volley from the Royal Marines who, with superior numbers and training managed to eliminate the threat from the enemy’s bowmen. Finally, with a moment to think, he realised that there was something that he could do for the lone cutter.

“Lieutenant,” he called to the leader of the marines.

“Yes captain,” the young officer promptly responded. The man was one of the few who had kept his wits about him following the magical assault.

“Could you kindly put a ballista up the giant backside of that frigate,” Henry said, indicating the nearest ship of the two that was making ready to board the lone Rubrumterran cutter.

“My pleasure captain,” the man’s face split into a grin as he spoke.

Henry now considered the task at hand, “Seaman,” he once again commanded of the signalman. “Order the cutters to fire the frigate, then to hang back while she burns.” Correcting his order he said, “have them aid the lone cutter once they fire her.”

“Aye captain,” the man’s arms were a flurry of activity as he conveyed the message to the remainder of the fleet.

There was a audible *crack* that emanated from the starboard side of the ship, causing Henry to turn and investigate. The young lieutenant’s aim had proven true, no mean feat considering the Invincible had now reached ramming speed and the target was over three hundred yards away

“Excellent shooting lieutenant,” Henry praised the Royal Marine.

A fifteen foot long missile now protruded from the rear of one of the frigates that had sought to capture the royal cutter. The missile had pierced the enemy vessel at the water line and a huge crack was opening up around the base of the hull. Taking on copious amounts of water, the ship was already beginning to lean to one side: it would sink in minutes. Henry knew deep down that he had only delayed the cutter's capture; the other enemy frigate had come alongside the cutter and had a much larger crew than the small scouting vessel. However, the early victory had done much good for morale and he felt confident that the crew of the cutter would delay the enemy boarding party long enough for help to arrive.

Paul, now fully dressed in the second officer's clothing, tore the badges of rank from the tunic and rubbed the grime from an overly used flannel across his face. To all outward appearances he now resembled a sailor of low rank who bathed infrequently. He stealthily made his way up the companionway and out onto the deck only to be greeted by an arrow that narrowly missed taking his life. In his absence the Invincible had borne down on the enemy destroyer and the Royal Marines and Sailors now congregated at the bow of the ship, ready to board the enemy vessel. Looking to port, the spy observed that the enemy ship's escort was surrounded by the smaller cutters of the

Royal Navy and that they had managed to set ablaze to a large portion of the frigate. He was a little disheartened to see that the inferno had spread to some of the royal cutters whilst they had been carrying out their task. Some desperate sailors dashed to and fro, vainly trying to put out the blaze that was quickly growing out of control. Others simply jumped overboard.

The spy knew that he had to stop the Tabula from falling into the hands of Prince Henry. He was now positive that the prince had been involved in the plot and would seize the document for himself. He assumed that Henry had made a deal with a foreign power and had hoped to lead the royal fleet away from the destroyer that they were imminently boarding. With Paul on board, he would have faced a mutiny if he had led the fleet away from their quarry. The sailors feared Paul's ability to manipulate Manaa, but they were grateful that he had been able to pinpoint the location of the scroll. Now the prince had had to alter his plans. He probably hoped to seize the Tabula for himself and then use the knowledge to further his position in court and re-establish Rubrumterra's old empire.

Pushing his musings aside Paul joined the ranks of the boarding party; just another nameless sailor making ready to board an enemy vessel.

Again the nobleman's silence was disturbed by a knock at his cabin door, this time by a lowly deckhand. "We're losing the ship," the sailor informed him.

"Leave," the nobleman dismissed the deckhand.

Most of the sailors aboard the vessel were terrified of their passenger and this sailor was no exception. Not having to be asked twice, the man fled the cabin and rejoined the desperate struggle that was transpiring above deck.

The nobleman drifted into a trance, searching the consciousnesses above decks for his trusted ally. The collaborator had ensured him that it wouldn't come to this, yet he knew that his chances of success would be greatly improved if he was accompanied by him during his flight: the man's nautical expertise of the Anriac Bay was second to nobody's. Finding his accomplice with ease, he relayed orders.

The Invincible crashed into the enemy destroyer at ramming speed to the delight of Henry and the assembled Royal Marines. Splinters of wood showered the decks of both ships and very few men managed to keep their footing during the collision. The marines were trained to recover quickly from such impacts and, in the briefest of moments, were pouring onto the deck of the enemy destroyer. Henry drew his cutlass and joined the fighting.

He cut, thrust and parried his way across the deck, killing two enemy sailors in the process. All around him Royal Marines and sailors of the Invincible were gaining the upper hand in the struggle. Henry was eager to be first to the captain's cabin, he was certain that this would be where he found the Tabula. An enemy sailor cut him off as he fought his way to the companionway leading to the officer's quarters but, seeing that his comrades were quickly becoming overwhelmed by the superior royal force, he threw down his weapons and surrendered to the prince. Henry ignored the cowering man and raced towards the companionway.

Paul had kept his footing during the collision and had been one of the first aboard the enemy vessel. A more than able swordsman, he had cut down several enemy sailors when the fighting had been at its thickest. Seeing that the rival sailors now understood their predicament and had started to surrender to the royal forces, Paul ran to the companionway; eager to get there before Henry did. Looking up, Paul realised he was too late.

Henry reached the entrance to the companionway and was just about to enter when a crossbow bolt flew out of the gloom and imbedded itself in his

left hand. The pain was excruciating! Henry narrowly missed certain death as a spear loomed out of the darkness, thrust in his general direction by a would-be assailant. Henry dodged backwards and readied himself for the attack that was certain to follow, grateful that his sword hand was his right hand.

Paul watched in horror as Henry made his way towards the companionway and the officer's cabins where the Tabula was surely being held. *He is going to get it,* Paul thought. Paul's shock turned to confusion as three Rigarians emerged from the gloom, setting about Henry. Realising his mistake, Paul ran to the aid of his prince.

The spearman thrust at Henry again who managed to parry the second blow to the side with his cutlass. Retreating out onto the deck, Henry was dismayed when three Rigarian marines emerged from the dark; heavily armed and much more motivated than the other enemy sailors had proven to be. Retreating further, Henry realised that his best course of action would be to delay the three marines until help arrived. All three men advanced on the prince, the centremost armed with a spear and the two men either side armed with broadswords. The spearman advanced forward, taking a third swipe at

Henry in the process. But this time Henry had been ready for the attack. Now removed from his cohort, the spearman had overextended himself in his lunge. Henry seized the opportunity, dodging the spearhead but instead of retreating, he advanced on his enemy rendering the weapon useless as the wooden body of the spear slid harmlessly along his midriff. Henry thrust his cutlass, much more suited to the cramped fighting conditions, into the man's chest. The marine went limp and collapsed as the prince withdrew his weapon from the dying man's body to receive the inevitable attack from his two companions.

The two advanced on Henry with new found respect for their adversary. Henry knew that he couldn't hold the two men at bay for long and that the fighting would soon become desperate. Henry exchanged a couple of blows with the men; from their blade work they were obviously well trained and experienced fighters who were familiar with one another. The two worked in tandem, never allowing Henry a moment to take stock of the situation. He blocked a blow from one of the two, leaving himself open to the blade of the other marine. Henry readied himself for the inevitable thrust but, just as he expected to feel the steel of the man's blade, Paul joined the fray.

The spy caught the killing blow on his own cutlass and plunged a dirk deep into the spine of Henry's would-be assassin. The man died instantly, his lifeless body slumping to the deck of the ship in a pool of blood.

“Go,” Paul said. “Get the Tabula. I can handle these two,” he added as he unleashed a series of furious blows against the remaining marines.

Convinced that Paul was more than a match for the remaining men Henry headed toward the companionway, though slightly more cautiously than the previous time. Making his way down the narrow staircase, he was startled by the sound of footsteps behind him. Looking back he was relieved to see Aidan several steps behind him. The first officer carried a large club in his right hand that had obviously been used to good effect during the mêlée; it was dripping thick crimson blood onto the wooden flooring. Aidan nodded at Henry, “Nearly there captain,” he said.

“Nearly,” Henry responded.

The two travelled down the staircase and entered the first of two cabins.

It had evidently belonged to the captain of the ship but Henry presumed that the vessel’s esteemed guest had been staying there for the duration of the voyage. The walls were lavishly decorated with tapestries and paintings worth several times the value of the ship and every surface was littered with pieces of parchment covered in a wiry scrawl. Elsewhere were alien instruments, the like of which the prince had never seen before, but Henry was certain were used for the study of Manaa.

“Empty,” Henry observed with his back to Aidan.

“Empty,” Aidan echoed.

Before Henry could respond, Aidan took two large steps across the cabin and struck him across the back of the head with his club.

Henry collapsed.

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The pursuer had successfully followed the sheikh’s party unobserved throughout the night. Now that the soldiers were making camp during the extreme heat of the day the tracker considered doing the same, yet a reasonable distance from the large band of armed men. Fully aware that Shahad’s men were going to abandon the sheikh’s party after the subsequent night; the follower was content to wait before making a move.

The men made camp as Aziz and Adaq moved out of hearing distance of the soldier’s camp. They trusted their men with their lives but neither could

vouch for the dependability of Shahad's men. They did not wish to risk being overheard.

"If Adalella and Durki are behind this, what would they do with the Tabula?" He had phrased his question poorly. "Where would they go with it?" he rephrased.

Adaq considered the question. "They couldn't stay in Sobrius. Those two idiots would be found out." The two, though ambitious, were not well known for their discretion. They continually had to pay off the fathers of local girls in Rubrumterra after several unwanted pregnancies, were often comatose drunk and had spent more than one night imprisoned after a brawl had gotten out of hand. All-in-all, the two had not shone during their stint in the island Kingdom. "They would have to move, but don't forget, it could only be one of them."

"I just can't see it being either," Aziz admitted. "They are such louts."

Adaq laughed. "I know!" he replied. "But appearances are deceptive. Most people think me nothing more than the pet of the great sheikh. Nothing more than a Court Jester for your amusement," he finished.

Aziz knew how many people viewed Adaq. He was considered the 'playboy' of the court, a dandy who owed his position to making the sheikh laugh. They couldn't be more wrong. Adaq's mind was the sharpest at court;

he created more policy than anybody else including the royal family, and most of his enemies were either dead or imprisoned. Aziz considered his advisor's observation, "true," he said, "but I just can't see these two being involved in such a plot," he finished.

"It may seem a little far-fetched Aziz," Adaq said. "But I have been thinking and there is a possible link between Adalella and the theft..."

"Go on," Aziz prompted.

"His family control a huge merchant fleet," Adaq chose his words carefully.

"Yes," Aziz agreed.

"And the contract was recently met with the Rubrumterrans...one of the reasons that he, specifically, was chosen to be sent to meet with the Rubrumterrans," he added.

"But to suggest..."Aziz started.

In a huge breach of court protocol, Adaq interrupted his friend. "So he would have had access to four or five cargo vessels in the wharf and we know from the New Sobriun ambassador that the Tabula left the kingdom by ship."

Aziz ignored the breach of court protocol, he appreciated Adaq's keen mind and the two were removed from court. "It seems plausible, but why wouldn't he bring the Tabula to the tribal lands, where they could use it to unseat my family in Lunan."

"I will come to that in a moment," Adaq countered. "Secondly we have to consider the position of Duki."

"Okay," the sheikh prompted.

"Prior to his retirement he held a prominent position in the marines," Adaq commented.

"Yes, he was second only to myself," Aziz agreed.

Both men were fully aware that, as sheikh, Aziz was technically the head of the army, navy and marines however; they were more ceremonial positions than actual positions of rank. Aziz, though heavily involved in the army, had never set foot upon the deck of a ship whilst assuming the position of command. Another reality that the two men were aware of was that soldiers, whose loyalty to the monarchy was questionable, were often forced into the marines and navy to keep them as far from Lunan as possible.

“So he would be able to provide the manpower for such an undertaking whilst Adalella could provide the equipment...” he allowed Aziz a moment to digest his theory.

“It seems that we have the means,” Aziz said. “But I don’t know why they wouldn’t head to the tribal lands with the Tabula. It would just make more sense.”

“Your family have made decisions unpopular with the people and the Muntiari...” Adaq began.

Aziz started to object but, in this informal atmosphere, Adaq continued anyway. “I know Aziz. And I admire you and your family’s ingenuity. The treaty between New Sobrius and Al-Rigar has secured your family’s omnipotence in the Kingdom and allowed Rigarians to build structures not seen since the time of the Old Empire.” Aziz seemed content with Adaq’s explanation. “Perhaps your enemies have realised the value of such alliances. They may have realised that to sit on the throne in Lunan, you must first secure the support of a foreign power...”

This time Aziz did interrupt, “But who?” he asked.

“Isn’t it obvious from our destination?” Adaq answered is question with another question.

“You think the Tsukese?” Aziz stated more than asked.

The Tsuki were a growing influence in the two continents of Rigar and Sobrius, though the Empire’s eyes had historically been turned eastwards. The secretive empire wouldn’t allow foreigners beyond The Great Wall but had ambassadors representing their interests in every nation throughout the three continents of Sobrius, New Sobrius and Rigar. The empire produced the majority of goods, varying from simple clothing to the most advanced ships, for the three continents as they could manufacture merchandise much more cheaply than any other nation. They had been growing in financial clout and military might for some time and currently posed a legitimate threat to New Sobrius, the other superpower in the region.

“Why not?” Adaq stated rhetorically. “It is no secret that the scholars in Rigar struggle to perform the simplest of Manaa manipulations.”

Aziz was forced to concede the point. The massive building project currently underway in the Kingdom was largely being led by the New Sobriuns who were employed by the Al-Rigarian government as the native scholars and architects did not possess the knowledge. “True,” Aziz agreed.

“The only scholars capable of using the knowledge in Sobrius, are reluctant to put into practice the information, and the Tsuki…” Adaq

concluded, "…the Tsuki would happily prop up the tribes as a 'puppet-government' if they gained access to our Manaa fields."

"True..." Aziz considered.

Henry's vision blurred as he regained consciousness. A small pinprick of white light pierced the foggy greyness that engulfed the majority of his vision.

"Captain," Paul was shaking Henry.

Trying to communicate to the spy that he had now gained consciousness and no longer needed to be shaken, the prince could only muster a groan.

"Water," Paul called to a nearby sailor.

The deckhand disappeared up the companionway, returning moments later armed with a hip flask full of water. Henry gulped down the liquid, feeling energy returning to his battered body. Considering the prince's privileged upbringing and the thousands of fine wines from across the globe that he had sampled during his life, he had never tasted anything so good. Now roused to full consciousness, Henry shakily got to his feet.

"Aidan, he..." Henry started.

"I know," Paul interrupted Henry.

“Where is he?” the prince asked, still feeling a little groggy

“He climbed down the aft of the ship and made away in a cutter with his master.” Paul paused. “You look awful captain,” the spy finished.

The prince’s tunic was soaked in blood, testament to the blow he had received from the traitorous first officer. A bandage now covered the wound, stemming the flow of blood but his left hand, which had received the crossbow bolt, looked awful. Henry wiggled his fingers, ensuring that they were still of use.

“The bolt passed through the fleshy bit of your palm captain,” Paul informed Henry. “There shouldn’t be any lasting damage but I suspect you will feel a chill during winter. Once we return to the Invincible we’ll patch you up.”

“What of the battle? How fare we?” Henry asked.

“Four of the cutters were sunk and a fifth was commandeered by Aidan and his master. The Invincible is in a bad way but she’ll make it back to port,” the spy reported.

“Leaving us with two cutters,” the prince stated, “and how many able men?” the prince asked.

“About sixty,” Paul estimated. “Only seven were lost in the fighting but around fifty are wounded,” he concluded.

Henry was relieved to hear that such few men had been lost in the battle. The true strength of the Royal Navy lay in the training and discipline of its sailors, not the number of ships that the Kingdom boasted.

“Where is the traitor now?” Henry asked, feeling more capable after the water.

“They made for the coast of Heim captain,” the spy reported. “The cutter was running a skeleton crew and had taken damage during the battle. I’m not the scholar of nautical matters that you are captain, but I wager they made for the nearest coastline. They could hardly keep afloat.”

Henry knew that Paul was correct in his surmise, the cutters weren’t designed for deep water travel at the best of times but with a depleted crew and a damaged hull the vessel wouldn’t get far. He was pleased to learn that only a few sailors had agreed to join Aidan in his mutiny too. He must have bribed a small number of sailors aboard the cutter to seize the vessel and kill the sailors who hadn’t already joined the sedition. The fact that such a small number had followed the first officer comforted Henry. “Orders,”

Henry called out. He had taken heed of the situation and was now ready to take action.

“Orders...” Paul echoed.

Mr. Lamb, the Invincible’s second officer appeared as if out of thin air next to the two men. “Aye captain?”

“You are now captain of the Invincible,” Henry informed the second officer.

“Captain?” The second officer seemed puzzled by the order.

“No, you are the captain,” Henry informed the second officer. “I am merely a weary traveller seeking a warm bed for the night.”

Paul caught Henry’s eye and smiled. He understood the prince’s train of thought and liked the plan that Henry was formulating.

“I’m afraid we are to leave you here highness,” the leader of Shahad’s men said respectfully to the sheikh.

“No need to apologise Major,” the sheikh said to the old campaigner. “God speed you in your journey.”

“And God speed you in yours,” the old soldier echoed in the formal salutation of farewell unique to the Nasir.

The Major saluted, as did the five hundred mounted men behind him, and turned his steed to depart. The sheikh couldn’t help but feel slightly more vulnerable as the large party of mounted men left his lesser force. Shahad’s men didn’t waste any time in their departure, churning up a huge dust cloud as the party made their way back to the oasis at a canter.

“Feeling a little naked?” Adaq asked.

Aziz wasn’t in the mood for banter, not only had he just lost a large portion of his command but he had also lost his last link with Shahad. He changed the subject, “So after Adalella and Durki steal the Tabula and present it to the Tsuki what happens next?”

“I don’t know,” Adaq pondered, sensing the sheikh’s bad mood. “There are several ways that they could go about it.”

“Such as?” Aziz prompted, grateful that his old friend knew him well enough not to press him on the cause of his ill temper.

“They could opt for the obvious option and simply launch a large scale attack on Sobrius and Rigar. With the knowledge gained from the Tabula and their already impressive army they could simply ride out from behind The

Great Wall and sweep aside all the opposition in their way. Once the dust had settled, they would prop-up Adalella and Durki as the leaders of the Rigarian Province and everybody would be satisfied."

"And the more subtle option?" Aziz added.

"They could bide their time, learn everything there is to from the Tabula. Then send a few esteemed scholars into Lunan and take the palace covertly. The Royal Garrison would be hopeless against such knowledge and power. Then they could replace you, with the support of the Muntiari, and the following day they would be ruling Al-Rigar at the whim of the Tsuki Empire," Adaq concluded.

"You paint a very bleak picture Adaq," Aziz commented.

"Well, there are a number of other ways they could go about it. Would you care if I continued to guess?" the advisor joked.

"Perhaps another time," the sheikh responded. His dark mood was still upon him.

"I have one other question though," he adjoined. "Why would they head to The Great Wall? Why not simply sail the Tabula south across the Anriac Bay and into the Frozen Sea? From there they would have a huge number of Imperial ports to dock at."

“Too risky,” Adaq concluded at once. “The Anriac Bay is awash with privateers from Malpasse and Rubrumterra. Only large fleets of more than twenty ships are truly safe more than several miles from shore. Also there is the geographical factor...”

“The geographical factor?” Aziz asked. Though he had been tutored in many things, the geography of the Tsuki Empire remained a mystery to Aziz. Most of the information that was known about the internal happenings and landscape of the secretive country were passed on via word of mouth by sailors and refugees. The sheikh had had little cause to socialise with either, whilst Adaq dealt with them on a daily basis for matters of trade.

“Yes,” Adaq said, realising his master’s ignorance of the situation. “The impassable Chun-Shu cliffs surround the Tsukese western coast. As far as I know they have never been scaled by man and provide an impassable natural barrier: it is the reason the Tsukese were never absorbed into the Old Empire or that of the Rubrumterrans. By a quirk of fate and no doing of their own, the Tsukese posses the most impenetrable natural boundary in The Four Continents,” Adaq concluded his geography lesson.

“But aren’t there ports to the south?” Aziz asked. In no way did he find his old friend patronising, he was genuinely interested in the topic, “Where the huge cities are?”

“Yes but getting to them would prove difficult at this time of year.” Again Adaq realised the sheikh wasn’t following his train of thought. “The frozen sea is only passable for about three to four months every year. The rest of the time the water freezes and becomes a solid mass of ice.” Adaq paused to check the sheikh was following. Seeing that he was, he continued, “The temperature falls so low that a human could not walk across the ice for fear of freezing. So this leaves only The Great Wall as their destination.”

Adaq’s reasoning seemed sound. “But why have those huge ports along the south coast if they are useless for three-quarters of the year?” Aziz asked.

“Where the cities are located there is a warm southern current, melting the ice and allowing them to trade freely from the harbours,” Adaq answered. “However passage to them from Sobrius is impossible as the ice is thickest just off the south-west tip of the empire.”

“But who do they trade with?” Adaq asked, now fully absorbed in the subject.

“The cities are much larger than any in Rigar, or Sobrius for that matter. From what I can ascertain, they mostly trade amongst one another and with a few smaller nations that have, so far, managed to resist Tsuki ambition.”

“So ultimately, whoever has stolen the Tabula, be-it Adalella and Durki or some other agent of the tribal lands, or maybe even the Tsukese themselves, would be heading toward The Great Wall?”

“I believe so,” Adaq responded, “But there was one possibility that you overlooked in your surmise my sheikh.” It was one of the rare occasions that Adaq called Aziz by his full title.

“What?” Aziz looked puzzled.

“It could have been a New Sobriun defector.”

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Paul was confused. Everywhere he looked were contradicting traces of evidence that lead in different directions. The ships were of no design that he recognised in four continents, something completely alien to him in every aspect of their being. The three marines who had so vehemently defended their master were clearly Rigarian, yet the cabin was littered with documents originating from Rubrumterra, New Sobrius and the Tsuki Empire.

“Make ready,” Henry called to the men aboard the tiny boat. “Brace!” he shouted as they neared the pebbly shoreline of Heim.

Henry’s head still throbbed from the wound he had had sustained earlier though the gash on his hand had been cleaned and dressed to prevent infection. He had handed over command of the Invincible to Mr. Lamb, the acting captain, who now waited in deeper water whilst the landing party was dropped on the shore of Heim. He was under strict orders from the prince to take the Invincible back to Partallow for repairs in the dry dock; taking the wounded and the two cutters back with him. Henry had quickly assembled a party of ten to go ashore and continue their quest on land. It consisted of himself, Paul and eight of the more able deckhands from the Invincible who had managed to avoid injury during the melee. He planned to travel under the guise of a group of mercenaries seeking employment: ten was a number small enough not to draw attention yet large enough that nobody should try their luck against them.

The small rowing vessel made a scraping sound as it was beached and the hull of the boat scraped along the pebbly terrain.

“Out,” Henry ordered.

The men jumped out of the boat into the shallow water, they then helped push the boat back into deeper water so that the oarsmen could return to the Invincible, before making their way up the beach and into the dunes of Heim.

Relations between Heim and Rubrumterra had been good in recent years, though only two generations earlier it had been a different case. Heim had been, and still was, the powerhouse in Sobrius. Under the leadership of a mad dictator the country had sought to engulf all Sobrius and Rigar into its borders; a feat only achieved once before by the people of the Old Empire. Success had been within reach for Heim but, nearing the end of the struggle, the New Sobriuns had unleashed an unprecedented amount of Manaa, destroying two entire cities in the country. Facing such overwhelming might Heim had been forced to surrender with much of its army intact. Recently Heim had pushed for closer relations with Rubrumterra and Malpasse in an attempt to unify the continent of Sobrius. They still remained the major force on the continent and it was largely their authority that kept foreign powers from turning their greedy eyes towards the landmass.

“We’ll make for Groβstadt,” Henry informed the men. “From there we can refit to look more the part,” he added. Looking around he realised his men more resembled beggars or street thugs rather than mercenaries. They mostly

wore shabby grey tabards that they had acquired from the dead enemy and only half of the men wore some kind of shoes. They were armed with cutlasses, not broadswords or rapiers more suited to land-based warfare, betraying them for sailors. On the positive side, they all bore slight wounds from the battle and most definitely looked dangerous and malevolent enough to play the part of mercenaries.

As they began the journey to Groβstadt, Paul moved alongside Henry so that they could converse. “It’s not far to the capital,” he informed Henry, “About half a day’s march.”

“Good,” the prince responded. He was still feeling the effects of the wound to the rear of his head. “Do we have a contact in the city?” Henry asked.

Paul was loathe to give up any information concerning his espionage network but the spy had discounted any doubts he had previously felt concerning Henry’s loyalty and had handpicked the eight men who they now travelled with; he could assume their loyalty. “Yes we have,” Paul replied. “And better than that, we have a safe house.”

“Who is it? Anybody I’d know?” Henry asked. He knew very little about the workings of the Intelligence Corps and assumed the spy in Heim would be a

person highly placed who lived in palatial surroundings; much like the spies he had read about in novels during his childhood.

“Effectively she was my mother,” the Spy responded.

“I thought your mother was in Partallow?” Henry asked in confusion.

“She was,” the spy answered.

Sensing that there was more to the story, Henry changed the subject. “And where is the safe house?” he asked.

Paul smiled, “It’s a lovely place, not far from the merchant quarters.”

“Is it a shop?” Henry guessed. “A warehouse? A Potter’s?” Henry allowed the intrigue of the situation to get the better of him.

“Not entirely highness,” Paul said. “It’s a brothel.”

“A brothel?” exclaimed the prince, much to the amusement of Paul and the assembled men.

“You can stop smiling Briggs,” he said pointing at one of the sailors who now bore a huge grin.

The pursuer noticed movement to the east of the encampment. From this distance the follower couldn't make out what was happening. All the tracker could make out was a large dust cloud gathering above the far ridge.

The time for action was growing ever nearer.

"Highness," the sergeant patiently waited to be acknowledged by the sheikh. The warrior was an old veteran, a skilled campaigner with a multitude of scars who had probably enlisted as a child and earned his rank the hard way. Aziz knew to take heed of such old hands; they were the heart and soul of the army and had been fighting since before the sheikh could walk.

"Yes sergeant," Aziz appreciated the man's discipline.

"The sentry has sighted a dust cloud to the east," he reported. "Should I send a scout?" The question was more a suggestion than an inquiry.

The sheikh left the shelter of his tent to get a better look at the occurrence. "Yes sergeant," Aziz agreed with the experienced man. "Have the men stand to as a precaution," added the sheikh. "But quietly."

Aziz watched as the Sergeant conveyed the order to the men. The old campaigner then made his way to the soldier used as the scout for the unit and

whispered something in his ear whilst gesturing towards the rise where the dust cloud was gathering. The man took his bow and started the long jog to the top of the ridge immediately, his youthful battle companion rolling his eyes in an exaggerated manner when he realised that he now had to pack two tents instead of one. Aziz almost smiled as the Sergeant firmly berated the young soldier before flashing him a wry smile and patting him on the back. The sheikh always found a sergeant's manner, a mix of bully and father figure, rather amusing.

"What's happening?" Adaq asked Aziz sleepily.

Adaq was a man of politics and trade, warfare was not his forte and neither was rising early. He had detailed his squire to pack his tent and made his way over to join the sheikh, still buckling his rapier around his waist as he joined Aziz. Though not a natural soldier, the rapier that hung at his waist was not for show. He was a better-than-average swordsman who practised daily at the insistence of Aziz.

"Look," Aziz pointed in the direction of the dust cloud. The scout was now three-quarters of the way to the top of the dune. "What do you think would cause that?" he asked.

“Probably a caravan,” Adaq seemed unfazed “It wouldn’t be the first scare that we’ve had.”

The sheikh was forced to agree with his advisor. They had passed several caravans during their journey and all had produced similar dust clouds. The caravans were usually heavily armed against the possibility of bandits and would appear relieved when the large band of armed men passed them by.

The scout reached the top of the ridge and used his hand to shield his eyes from the low setting sun. The dust cloud was still several hundred yards away and if the force proved to be hostile he was certain he was far out of range of the host’s bowmen. This was the fourth occasion that he had been ordered to investigate the origins of a large dust cloud and all of the previous times had resulted in little to be feared.

Aziz watched as the scout crested the rise and looked out towards the horizon. *Sloppy*, the sheikh thought to himself: the scout had made no effort to conceal his location.

“Where shall we make for...?” Adaq’s enquiry was cut short.

For Aziz the world dissipated into slow motion. The scout had barely crested the rise for a second when something hit him in the chest, spinning

him around. Now facing back the way that he had just ascended a subsequent missile hit him in the back, knocking him to his knees. A second figure joined the soldier on the ridge, garbed from head to toe in white cloth. The newcomer reached down and grasped a handful of the kneeling man's hair. Pulling back his head, an action that seemed to take an eternity for Aziz, he simultaneously unsheathed a long curved scimitar with his free hand and held it to the man's throat. Almost goading Aziz to prevent the inevitable the man arrayed in white slowly drew the scimitar across the soldier's throat, nearly decapitating him in the process. The dead guardsman's lifeless body rolled several times down the dune before coming to rest against a small shrub that somehow managed to carve out an existence in the hostile environment

A moment later the man dressed in white was joined by his comrades.

The prince and his nine companions had made their way to Groβstadt without incident. After several days at sea the men seemed happy to stretch their legs and the group had made much better time than Paul had expected. They had reached the city just after sunset and found their way to the Rubrumterran base for intelligence operations in the Republic of Heim.

“It’s quite the place you have here Madame,” Henry said. He was rather bemused to find himself in his current surroundings.

“Thank you highness,” the rotund woman responded. “It serves a purpose.”

Whilst the men of the Invincible enjoyed the more sinister attractions provided by the establishment, Henry was content to formulate a plan with Paul and the leader of the Kingdom’s Intelligence Corps in Heim. He had accepted the offer of a drink, yet refused the lively woman’s offer of company. Henry had found the woman utterly unmanageable; she had been extremely accommodating to the men despite Henry’s original stance that military discipline should be maintained during their stay. The prince had finally been convinced and, after a drink, had conceded that it would appear unusual for a band of mercenaries to stay in a brothel without frequenting the merchandise.

It had taken Paul some time to persuade Henry that the plump woman, who had taken the pseudonym Madame Troisieme, was actually in the employ of his father. The vociferous lady, *if she could be called a lady,* seemed nothing more than a bimbo employed to peddle the wares of the seedy establishment. She was loud, obnoxious and always seemed to be laughing at a client’s ill-humoured gags. However, now that Henry found himself alone with the woman, he was discovering an acute intelligence hidden behind her visage of

excessive makeup and repartee. She possessed a knowledge and understanding of local politics that far surpassed the prince's own and was able to extract information from the most taciturn of individuals.

"How so Madame?" Henry asked, referring to the woman's earlier statement.

Madame Troisieme laughed. "Even the most skilled of torturers wouldn't be able to unearth the information that my girls can." She noticed Henry's confusion at the statement. "Would you rather talk to a dirty old man stretching you on a rack and mutilating your giblets, or an attractive young lady holding you in perfumed arms whilst sipping a glass of wine?"

Henry conceded her point. "The second sounds much more tempting," he said and swallowed another mouthful of wine.

Again the deceptively intelligent woman laughed, several of her chins wobbling as she openly displayed her mirth. "But I still couldn't tempt you now? Some of my courtesans are reserved only for the nobility."

Henry blushed. He had no idea what to make of the comment. In the end he simply responded, "No."

"As you wish." She was obviously enjoying his discomfort. "I will have to find out why I am honoured with your presence some other way."

As she spoke the door opened and Paul joined them in the lavishly decorated room. From every possible inch of the ceiling bright drapes hung to give the illusion of privacy in the room. Royal blues, shocking pinks, scarlet reds and many other garish weaves of fabric cascaded from the zenith of the room which itself was adorned with paintings of odd design. The floor was littered with cushions and divans, lain out for clients to make themselves comfortable on. Non-precious gemstones embellished the edges of every piece of cloth and several scented burners filled the air with perfumed smoke. Henry couldn't imagine a more tasteless environment.

Currently the room was occupied only by Henry, Paul and Madame Troisieme. Henry had made himself comfortable on a large pillow, whilst Madame Troisieme's bulk spilled across two. Paul had only just entered the room and sat on a brash yellow divan opposite the prince. All three had been drinking for some time, Madame Troisieme acting the hostess as the other two unwound after the battle and the journey to Groβstadt. Paul had briefly left to see to matters of business and returned in the guise of a merchant.

"What's the topic?" Paul inquired whilst pouring himself a glass of wine.

"Just this place," Henry answered his question.

"Yes it really is quite remarkable," the Spy responded.

“That it is.” Even Henry wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic. “But we always seem to be one step ahead of the Republic, so the work here has to be commended,” Henry said and raised his glass in mock salute.

“Here, here,” Madame Troisieme joined the toast.

“So how did you two meet?” Henry asked, “You are the most unlikely couple.”

Madame Troisieme’s eyes quickly shifted to Paul’s. She held his gaze for a moment before he nodded, an indication that it was okay for her to proceed. “We met in the Favanas,” she started.

The small islands had been under the stewardship of the Rubrumterrans since Imperial times despite their proximity to the Republic. The islands were significant both strategically, providing a naval base so near to the coast of Heim, and economically, there was a large deposit of Manaa located to the east of the island. The territory was the only cause of friction in an otherwise stable relationship between the two nations.

“I thought your father married a woman in Partallow?” Henry interrupted.

“She did,” Paul said despondently. “But they died...” Henry was sure the Spy wouldn’t be revealing so much if it wasn’t for his intoxication and the

relationship the two had developed since the battle at sea. “The smallpox,” Paul added.

“Oh, I see...” Henrys good mood was fast absconding.

“We met at a tavern in the islands,” Madame Troisieme continued in an attempt to prevent a bad atmosphere from developing. “He was working as a pot washer in the kitchen but I was certain I had met him before.” She smiled in reverie.

“And you had,” Paul’s disposition changed as the two shared the memory. “I had been at the docks the day you had arrived.” He chuckled to himself.

“I had just started in the employ to your father,” she said directly to Henry. “...and had been sent to the islands to investigate the governor’s loyalty...” She took a moment to relive the memory, “...I was quite the looker back then.”

“And I was a little boy,” Paul added.

“Ha! You were little but you were *no* boy,” the woman retorted. “You already ran a gang at the waterfront and had extorted half the merchants in the market,” she informed the prince. “He had stolen a necklace given to me by your father, Henry.” The prince looked a little confused. “I was to act the

part of a wealthy merchant's daughter and seduce the governor...something that I carried out quite satisfactorily," she added.

Paul screwed up his face in disgust. "Really?" he asked. "Is that necessary?"

The woman laughed. "And he wouldn't give it back to me until I paid him for it." She ignored the Spy's remark. "And do you know what he charged me for the return of my jewellery?" she asked.

Henry shook his head.

"He charged me two silver coins!" She sat back in mock outrage. "Two whole silver coins for a necklace worth over a hundred gold sovereigns!"

Paul had the good grace to blush. "I was only eleven," he said, "I had no idea how much it was worth!"

It was a common scam in the Kingdom. Travellers passing through a market or a port would be pick-pocketed and, to escape the wrath of the law, a youngster would often miraculously 'find' the precious object and turn it over for a small reward. If the victim refused to pay the ransom, they would never see the object again and the local sheriff would be contacted to see to the matter.

“After I paid him three silver coins, we became firm friends.” She chortled. “His network of street urchins and sailors proved invaluable to me.”

“At a fair price,” Paul added.

“Ha, I think I’m still hurting from the experience now,” she joked. “But with myself located at the palace and Paul keeping an eye on the comings and goings of the harbour we made a great team.” She seemed genuinely fond of the Spy. “And when the time came, I took him back with me to Heim.”

Henry was becoming engrossed in the tale. “What happened in Heim?”

“I was trained by the Madame,” Paul answered the question. “I worked for the Madame until I was fifteen where my abilities came to the attention of the Spymaster in Partallow,” he recounted modestly. “I was then trained at the academy in the capital.”

Henry knew of the existence of the academy at one of the old palaces but had never taken the time to visit the institute. Despite not having visited, he was acquainted with the rigorous training that members of the Royal Intelligence Corps were forced to endure. They were extensively educated in the history of the four continents, current affairs and diplomatic relations between the nations. The men spent time at court and were given military training, serving as a squire to a minor noble and given actual commands

within the armed forces. Most importantly they could not progress from the academy without reaching a certain aptitude in the process of Manaa manipulation.

“So what is your actual position now?” Henry sensed that Paul had not been entirely truthful with him.

“I am...” he paused, “Senior.” Paul now fully trusted the prince, discounting his earlier suspicion as a consequence of his fatigue and the extreme gravity of the situation.

Henry realised that Paul was most probably the spymaster of the Rubrumterran Intelligence Corps but, despite his intoxication, decided not to press the man further.

“How did you find yourself in the Favanas?” he asked.

Paul took a while to compose his thoughts. It had been a long time ago and though the pain had grown faint; it still hurt him to think about. “My father died before I had grown my first baby teeth,” he said matter-of-factly. “My mother was forced to endure a life on the streets...we were destitute,” he added. “After she got smallpox she took me to a tall man.”

Henry’s mirth had left him. He no longer felt the joy that the wine had brought him.

“The man was my uncle. An honest man, but one without the means to care for a six year old boy,” Paul continued. “He said he knew a man who owned a tavern in the Favanas, where I could earn my keep.” Henry was astonished by the Spy’s detachment. “The very next day my mother put me on board a ship and I never saw her again...she was so sick.” The room had fallen silent; the only sound was the crackling of the flame as the oil burnt in the scented torches. “A few months later my uncle sent word that she had died.”

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Aziz looked around desperately trying to find anything that could give his forces an advantage. He estimated that nearly two hundred men were arrayed against him and his force numbered half of that. The men were on foot and were dressed from head to toe in white, lending them the appearance of phantoms in the fading light. Fortunately he had ordered his men to stand to prior to the deceased scout’s ascension of the dune, so they had not been caught entirely unawares. Looking behind him, the sheikh realised that the dune mound levelled out. The enemy forces were unmounted and an open plain would allow his men the room to manoeuvre more easily on their steeds

and would eliminate the advantage that the enemy's archers currently enjoyed.

"Back," he shouted.

As one, the men turned their mounts and retreated onto the plain. The leader of the men clad in white couldn't have been an experienced soldier as, interpreting the manoeuvre as a sign of retreat, the host gave chase.

When Aziz's men had travelled a few hundred metres onto the plain, he barked, "Horseshoe!"

The men instantly obeyed and formed into two columns of fifty riders. The column on the left wheeled around to the left in a U-turn, whilst the column on the right mimicked the action in a mirror image. The men now faced the mass of white garbed soldiers head on and the two assembled forces charged at one another.

"Arrowhead!" the sheikh bellowed, his voice barely heard above the clatter of hooves.

Again the men obeyed instantly, forming a wall of flesh and metal with Aziz at its pinnacle. Adaq, more suited to the gentlemanly combat of duels, took up a position towards the rear of the formation.

The men of both hosts gave a mighty roar as battle was joined.

The pursuer watched on with keen interest. The two forces had just joined battle, half of both hosts being lost in the first few seconds as they clashed. The air filled with the sound of dying men and horses as a river of crimson blood stained the sands of the Rigarian desert. It was impossible to know what was happening in the melee for the first moments as men were trampled by horses, arrows unseated riders and soldiers lost their footing amid the gore.

However, the follower was patient and was willing to wait.

The two forces clashed and, as the sheikh had expected, the sheer bulk of the mounted soldiers had proven to be an advantage in the mayhem. Most of the Royal Guard had been thrown from their saddles in the impact and some others had been unsaddled by shying horses; terrified by the scent of blood. Others had been lucky enough to ride straight through the enemy and could now patrol the periphery of the battle, selecting easy targets to engage who had become isolated amid the confusion.

Aziz got to his feet and drew the broadsword that rested at his hip. He had lost his sabre when his horse had ridden over two enemy soldiers simultaneously and he had been flung from the saddle, besides, the sword that he held now was much better suited to fighting on foot than the long curved blade of the sabre.

He tried to take heed of the situation but was immediately confronted by an enemy swordsman. With little skill, the man slashed violently downwards at the sheikh who easily parried the blow and riposted, nearly skewering his adversary on the sharp point of his sword. But instead of regrouping the man simply continued with his attack, swinging wildly with his blade like a child who had never previously wielded a weapon. Aziz was astonished by the man's recklessness and quickly ended his life.

Adaq had been one of the lucky riders who had managed to stay saddled during the initial charge. He had ridden over one man who had quickly died under the weight of his mount's hooves and managed to injure another, slicing at him with his sabre. Now he turned his horse with the remaining cavalry and prepared to pick off the enemy soldiers who had been thrown from the fray by the impact and who had fled from the battle; but there weren't any. He watched in confusion as a man clad in white got to his feet, recovered his

weapon and charged thoughtlessly into the thick of the fighting without any concern for his own life.

“Dismount,” the surviving officer ordered his men.

Adaq complied. Though technically outranking the officer, he was no expert of military tactics and presumed his best chance of survival would be to pay attention to those who were.

“Form a line,” the officer commanded as the men hurried to obey.

Adaq estimated that fifteen men stood in the column at the edge of the fracas. He couldn’t be certain but he thought that he saw a figure sliding down the far dune to join the battle. He lost sight of the individual as the officer shouted, “charge!”

The follower could see the sheikh at the heart of the melee and decided that now was the time to strike. Throwing caution to the wind, the pursuer ran at full pace across the plain having just slid down the dune. With the battle met, nobody would notice a lone traveller as the soldiers were troubled with more immediate concerns than anything else occurring. When the follower was within a hundred yards of the battle and two hundred of the sheikh, the

figure stopped. Taking time to ensure the aim was true; the follower pulled back the rigid cord of a longbow and took aim.

Aziz knew that the outcome of the battle lay in the balance. His men had enjoyed success in the preliminary charge, probably slaying forty enemy soldiers in exchange for ten of their own and his unit was better trained and equipped than the enemy, but the men clad in white were reckless to the extreme. They didn't seem to care if they survived the fight and some of the more fervent enemy appeared eager to die. Aziz had just witnessed one soldier clad in white allow a Royal Guardsman to stab him in the abdomen so that, with his opponent's sword engaged, the man was free to cut the guardsman's throat. It beggared belief.

The heavy fighting had now travelled to Aziz's vicinity of the battle and all around him men from both sides were falling casualty to their foes. The sheikh was effectively duelling with one of the more able enemy soldiers when, from the corner of his eye, he saw a comrade despatched by one of the white clad soldiers. The victorious soldier decided to join the sheikh's deadly contest, taking up position next to his companion and launching a low attack aimed at hamstringing Aziz. The sheikh narrowly managed to avoid the thrust and was only just fast enough to parry a blow from the second blade. Again the

two came at Aziz, this time the man to the sheikh's left feinted whilst the man on his right launched a viscous over hand blow that nearly served to cut Aziz in two. Luckily Aziz recognised the manoeuvre, one that he had employed many times in the past and had expected the assault from the man on the right, choosing to take a step to his left and engage the other swordsman. The swordsman had been caught off guard but had managed to parry Aziz's lunge and again the sheikh was forced to tackle two adversaries.

Aziz stumbled backwards over a corpse, realising that he could not best the two swordsmen and that by spending such a long period engaged with the same two foes he risked attack from another source. Just as he was beginning to despair one of the combatants was lifted from his feet by incredible force. A moment later the same happened to the sheikh's other adversary, freeing Aziz to quickly despatch of an enemy soldier locked in a death embrace with one of his own men.

Adaq and his companions had brought some order to their segment of the battle, though the majority of the fray had descended into chaos. Where Adaq and the officer had entered the skirmish there was a defined line separating Royal and enemy soldiers. This had allowed the guardsmen, who operated more efficiently as a unit, to become organised and had cost the

enemy dearly. Despite this advantage Adaq estimated that five of the fifteen had fallen to the soldiers garbed in white.

The advisor twisted his sword viciously, ensuring his opponent was dead. Earlier in the fray, he had watched as one of the men in white had surrendered to a guardsman, only to stab him with a concealed knife as the soldier had retrieved a length of twine from his tunic pocket. Adaq had decided that he wasn't going to risk falling victim to the same ploy.

"To me!" the officer next to Adaq called.

More and more men joined the line that the Royal Guard were establishing and, as they became more organised, the battle began to shift in their favour. The bodies of the men clad in white began to mount up and the guardsmen started to advance. On the other side of the conflict, Adaq could see that Aziz had brought some order to the battle and had also formed a line of soldiers. The two lines were moving toward one another, sandwiching the enemy soldiers in the centre. Every so often Adaq noticed that one of the white clad men would be lifted from their feet, a clothyard shaft emanating from their chest or back. Looking to his right, Adaq saw an unknown bowman release another arrow into the fray.

Aziz had finally managed to organise the men and was now beating back the enemy force. He considered that a normal unit would usually rout under such conditions but that these men appeared to be more suicidal fanatics than trained soldiers.

Faced by another opponent, Aziz continued in the gruesome task at hand.

Henry had made his way to Paul's room shortly after waking and bathing in the most vulgar of bath chambers conceivable. The ceiling had been rudely painted with the images of naked women and acts of crudeness that the prince didn't know existed, let alone ones that he had heard of. The walls of the bath chamber had been painted a cherry red and adorned with Pyrite, or fool's gold as it was more commonly known. The bath itself was relatively clean but Henry had been forced to evict one of the Invincible's sailors who had been accompanied by a young woman. He had turned a distinct shade of burgundy as he had scolded the man and had been baffled when the woman had burst into tears and fled from the room.

"Do we procure another ship?" Henry asked of the two.

"Too expensive," Paul interjected.

In times gone by, the Rubrumterrans would have been able to fund such an undertaking but in recent years only the Tsuki and the New Sobriuns were able to afford such expense.

“I think the best course of action would be to continue in your current guise,” Madame Troisieme said, “...and then cross the disputed border with Al-Rigar and continue to The Great Wall that way.”

“But what about Aidan and the thief?” Henry asked.

“What about them?” asked Paul.

“The fastest route is by sea. Surely they’ll hire a ship and continue that way.” Henry appeared concerned. “If we travelled by land we’d be gifting them a week head start.”

“I have reason to believe they are travelling by land.” Paul was holding something back. Paul now fully trusted Henry and his loyalty to his family. He was certain that the prince harboured ambitions of rising above his current station; perhaps as the governor of a new conquered territory or within the court in Partallow itself, but he was knew that he was loyal to the Kingdom. The spy was a little concerned with the ease at which Aidan had fooled him. Paul’s instincts usually served him well and the simplicity with which the traitor had tricked him unnerved him.

“The business I attended to last night...” he started, glancing at Madame Troisieme to be certain it was okay to proceed. She nodded. “It was a tavern that we use to monitor the comings and goings of people in Groβstadt,” he said. “And I was informed that two travellers matching the description of Aidan and our thief joined a caravan bound for Al-Rigar.”

“But they could have been anyone,” Henry interjected.

“No,” Madame Troisieme concluded. “The thief hired thirty caravan guards and commissioned the expedition with no cargo.”

“Why didn’t you...”Paul started but was interrupted by the bulbous woman.

“We had to be certain,” she stated, “If two sources confirmed the same information than we can be certain that it wasn’t a dupe.”

Paul was forced to concede the point. It wouldn’t be the first time that an individual had paid off a local official to give false information. However, he was slightly irritated that his old friend hadn’t shared the information with him. Though Paul was now her superior, the canny old woman still occasionally left him in the dark about matters of security if she believed it would further the Kingdom’s cause.

“Thirty men?” Henry interrupted. “We’ll need to hire mercenaries.”

“Again that wouldn’t be a good idea highness,” Madame Troisieme interrupted. “Nobody would blink at hiring one or two mercenaries to protect your daughter on her way to the docks. But hiring a band of men...” she considered her words. “That is like telling the whole of Groβstadt that you have something valuable, something worth stealing,” she concluded

“So why did Aidan and the thief hire thirty men?” Henry asked.

“Thirty is probably a good number,” Madame Troisieme concluded. “It is a small enough number not to attract too much attention but one large enough to stop, or delay, most enemy bands.”

“Especially when you can conjure giant fireballs the size of small ships,” Paul added. “He just needs enough men to hide behind for a few seconds before he unleashes a Manaa attack.”

“But why don’t we hire thirty men too if it’s such a good number?” Henry asked.

“For two reasons.” Paul said, holding up his hand and extending two fingers. “Firstly, it would be too suspicious.” The Spy noticed Henry’s confusion and elaborated further. “Hiring thirty swords yesterday at the caravan market caused quite a stir,” he started, “If another thirty were to be hired the following day and then give chase to the original band, people would become

very interested and start sniffing around," he concluded. "Secondly, we just can't trust the men."

Henry was forced to agree with this point, he had trusted Aidan with his life and he had stolen the Tabula and made away with the precious document. If one of his most loyal officers had done this, how could he trust anybody else? "Agreed," Henry said.

"Oh, and there's one other thing." Madame Troisieme added as if she had just remembered.

"Yes?" Henry and Paul asked at the same time.

"You're going to need a guide to get you across the disputed border undetected," the large woman informed the two.

"Oh no..." Paul started.

The men in white continued to fight despite their dwindling numbers and strategic disadvantage. Adaq realised that they were suicidal fanatics and would die to the last rather than risk capture. "Get a prisoner," he commanded.

The enemy soldiers sustained their struggle until only three remained. Seeing their predicament as hopeless, the three men shouted something before plunging their own swords into their stomachs and gutted themselves. Adaq was shocked by the actions of the three men and so were the soldiers, not one had managed to prevent the heinous act and capture a prisoner. This annoyed the advisor as he was eager to find out who these people were, though he had an engulfing suspicion that he knew the enemy's true identity.

Escaping his reverie, Adaq realised that Aziz was walking over to greet him. "How did we do?" Adaq asked.

"Well," Aziz replied. "They may have been untrained suicidal morons but they outnumbered us two to one," the sheikh concluded. "We have twenty three able bodied soldiers, sixteen injured and a lot of dead."

"Horses?" Adaq asked.

"Not enough," Aziz responded.

In the vast expanses of the Rigarian desert, a mount was essential to survival. The distances were too vast for humans to cross on foot and to be without a horse or camel would often lead to certain death.

Suddenly Adaq had an idea. Turning to one of the few able bodied men he ordered him to, “Take five men and crest that ridge,” he said, indicating the dune from where the enemy soldiers had originated. “Bring back anything of value,” he added.

“Why?” Aziz asked. He knew his friend too well than to counter the order but was curious as to why he was sending a small party over the rise.

“They had to get here somehow,” Adaq responded. “I wager they left their baggage and mounts over the other side of that crest.”

“Do we know who they are?” Aziz asked his advisor.

Adaq bent down and searched one of the fallen men. He ordered a few nearby guardsmen to do the same with several other corpses but all of their efforts were fruitless. “Nothing your grace,” the only remaining officer reported to Adaq.

“Thank you captain,” Adaq responded. Turning to Aziz the advisor changed his tone of voice and looked a little puzzled, “nothing.” He thought for a moment before speaking again. “What organisation in all Al-Rigar could command their followers to remove any identifiable markings or possessions, have them attack the senior-most noble in the Kingdom and convince them that it was a good idea to die in the progress?”

“Only one,” Aziz concluded.

“Yes,” Adaq concurred. “We need to be ready to...”

“Highness,” called a voice, “your grace. We have a prisoner,” one of the surviving guardsmen yelled.

The sheikh and his chief advisor made their way across the scene of the battle and towards the man who had caught their attention. Adaq was trying his best not to vomit as he walked through the sea of severed limbs, mutilated corpses and broken weaponry. The blood was so profuse that it stained the bottom of his boots red and already thousands of vultures, ravens and other scavengers were circling high above the battleground. They were preparing for a feast.

The two nobles arrived at the point where the man had been calling from to find the soldier looking a little chagrin and a hooded prisoner holding an expensive longbow.

“Corporal,” Aziz recognised the soldier, “Report!”

“Highness...” the man started, “ Urgh...err...” The man couldn’t seem to get his words out.

“What’s the matter corporal? Has the devil got your tongue?” Aziz asked in amusement.

Again the corporal couldn’t seem to string two words together in response. The prisoner brought an end to the soldier’s embarrassment, “I think he’s a little uncomfortable,” a familiar woman’s voice emanated from beneath the hood.

Both Aziz and Adaq were taken aback. Adaq immediately recognised the captive as the bowman, *or bow-woman,* who had ran across the plain and shot the two men who had made for Aziz during the melee. Officially she should be executed for taking up arms as a member of the weaker gender but she had just saved the sheikh’s life. Aziz and Adaq found such laws ridiculous but some of the men were staunch supports of Nasir law, believing that it should be upheld in even the grimmest of circumstances.

Aziz understood the corporal’s discomfort with the entire situation as he regarded the prisoner. The woman wore the traditional garb of the central Rigarian tribes who historically had to mask their passing by adorning clothes that matched their surroundings. At one hundred yards the woman would be completely invisible in the right light and any who wished her harm would not be able to find her. “Who are you?” Aziz demanded.

“A friend,” the response came.

Aziz thought he recognised the voice. “And how long have you been following us for?” he asked.

“Oh, not long,” the hooded figure responded, “I just had to be sure you didn’t steal my men.”

Aziz, in a giant breach of Nasir protocol, laid hands on the woman. He tenderly lifted the hood from the woman’s head to reveal what appeared to be a second hood beneath. However, there was a small slot in the second hood that revealed the pursuer’s eyes. They were eyes that the he recognised immediately. “Hi Shahad,” he said.

Madame Troisieme had bid them farewell at around midday as the party of eleven had departed from the sordid establishment. Henry had found himself a little reluctant to leave despite the vulgarity of the brothel and realised that he was genuinely going to miss the company of the portly proprietor. Trying not to dwell on events beyond his control, Henry adjusted his train of thought to much more immediate concerns.

His command consisted of himself, Paul, eight sailors from the Invincible and a guide called Lottë. Paul had made quite a fuss about Lottë joining the

group but Madame Troisieme had insisted that she was one of the few people in Heim with the ability and knowledge to cross the border into Al-Rigar undetected. She had long dark hair that reached almost to her waist and very distinctive, almost angular facial features that lent her the appearance of a Ferocian and wore the clothing of a tracker or hunter. She remained silent during Paul's protests which fell on Madame Troisieme's deaf ears but a glint in her eye had betrayed the humour that she had found in the whole situation. So far she had kept herself quiet, content to lead the party through the rolling green fields of the Heiman countryside. The group was only a few hours out of Groβstadt, so they had didn't need to fear for bandits or thieves just yet.

"Halt," Lottë called out.

Most of the party came to a stop but Henry journeyed to the front of the column accompanied by Paul.

"What is it?" Paul asked rudely.

"We'll leave the road here," she informed Paul. "That way we can make for the Anhohë foothills unobserved."

"Why don't we just head along the road to Grunzstadt?" he said. "There we can just bribe a local official on the Heiman side and a military officer on the Rigarian side. We'd be over in no time," he finished.

“It’s not that easy anymore,” she countered. “We can barely smuggle ale into Al-Rigar...getting ten people in that way would be either impossible or very expensive.”

Paul was more than aware of Lottë’s past. One of the many criminal enterprises that she had been involved in had been the smuggling of ale across the disputed border and into Al-Rigar. Whilst a tankard of ale in Heim cost a copper coin, the same tankard in Al-Rigar would sell for two gold sovereigns. Alcohol was illegal in the strict Nasir Kingdom but many nobles and rich merchants enjoyed a tipple in the safety of their own home. Lottë and her business associates had benefitted greatly from the traffic across the border and they were the only people who knew how to get contraband, be it people or wares, into Al-Rigar.

“So we have to travel through the mountains?” Paul asked.

“We’ll make for the foothills and then meet up with my associates there,” she said. “They can take us over one of the passes from there.”

Paul knew that a few mountain passes were left unguarded by either side; there were simply too many routes through the range. The larger passes that could accommodate a significant force or an army were usually occupied by a citadel on either side of the range, but the smaller and more dangerous

passes had been left unguarded. They were frequented by spies of both nations and smugglers moving contraband; Paul's favourite clientele. Most of the fighting was restricted to the Flachland plains, where large armies were free to manoeuvre and there were concentrated deposits of Manaa worth fighting for.

"Are you coming with us in Al-Rigar?" he asked nervously.

"It depends on me fee," she said flashing the Spy a smile. "But you'll be safe either way Pauly."

"Pauly?" Henry asked trying to hide his humour.

"Please..." Paul asked in a pained manner, "...don't." Realising who he was talking to, Paul added, "highness."

Henry smiled to himself, realising there was some history between the two that the Spy did not want to share with him just yet. "As you wish major," he said. Turning to Lottë, he changed the subject, "why do we need to leave the road unobserved?" he asked.

She spoke with a confidence that only his peers usually adopted when they spoke to the prince, "spies," she responded.

"Spies?" asked Henry.

“Some looking for you,” she said, “some looking for me, and some opportunists looking to unburden travellers of their wealth.”

“Is it really that bad?” Henry asked.

“We’ll be fine Henry,” she answered. “So long as nobody knows who you are and we all look menacing enough; bandits will leave us alone.”

Like any country in The Four Continents, Heim suffered from its fair share of unruly brigands and opportunist thieves. Before they had left Madame Troisieme had briefed them on what to expect between Groβstadt and the mountains. She had also suggested that nobody use Henry’s title as he would make a very valuable hostage for ransom and would be a very appealing target for any group of would-be kidnappers. The rest of the party had agreed with Madame Troisieme’s advice and, despite some of the Invincible’s men struggling with the notion, had agreed to use Henry’s first name only.

“Are we just to wait here indefinitely?” Paul asked impatiently.

“We’re just waiting for one more,” the smuggler responded, “Another old friend of yours.” She seemed to enjoy tormenting Paul.

“No!” Paul said in an exaggerated fashion. “It can’t be...”

As Paul was speaking another woman emerged from the side of the road. She was almost identical to Lottë in every way but bore a large scare down the left side of her face that crossed through her eye.

“What are you doing?” she demanded of the group, “Get off the road.”

“What are you doing here?” Aziz asked Shahad.

To all outward appearances the sheikh was furious but in reality he had never been happier. He had to give the impression of being angry with a woman who had betrayed her gender and taken up arms against men. However, her rank would spare her the wrath of the Muntiari and a public dressing down by an angry sheikh would be considered punishment enough by even the most conservative of Nasir followers. If she had been married her husband would have selected a suitable reprimand, but in the absence of a spouse, a Nasir Priest or a Royal were apt for the function

The chastise continued for a little longer and once Aziz was satisfied that the Royal Guardsmen would consider the woman punished, he brought an end to the rant. He quickly gave his men orders and took Shahad to one side so that they could speak in private. Adaq joined the two.

“Why did you really follow me?” Aziz asked.

“There are too many leaks at my court...there are too many leaks at every court,” she corrected herself, “You rule a divided Kingdom Aziz.”

“I know,” he responded.

The Tribal Lands to the north-west were in a continual state of war with Al-Rigar, despite the Kingdom claiming the lands as their own. Every few months a nomadic tribe would manage to bully a few smaller tribes into a loose alliance and they would march on Naristan. If it wasn’t for the New Sobriun mercenaries that supported the monarchy there, the region would have been lost years ago.

“But why did you personally come and follow me?” Aziz asked.

He was happy to see his old friend and had genuinely missed her company since leaving the oasis; however it was her duty to oversee the construction there and to defend the strategically significant position.

“I couldn’t really spare the men I sent with you,” she started. “If the citadel was attacked and the garrison was five hundred light, we would have been overrun.”

“So why did you send them with us?” he asked.

“And why did you follow us yourself?” Adaq added.

“One at a time gentlemen,” she retorted and grinned. “The Muntiari are a little more militant outside of Lunan.”

Aziz and Adaq nodded in unison. Both were fully aware of the armed bands of Muntiari who forced people to pray and would riffle through travellers’ goods in search of contraband. They would often distribute their own punishment but were only a minority and restricted to the desert plains outside of the large cities.

“They often pass through the oasis to resupply and visit the church,” she continued. “But after you had departed, one of my scouts reported that a large band of them had camped beyond the city walls the day before. I went out with my scout and realised that they had been waiting for you and must have given chase after you had left.”

“Couldn’t you have gotten word to us?” Adaq asked.

“Impossible,” Shahad replied. “Major Raquman would never have left me.”

“I don’t follow,” Aziz interjected.

“He would have stayed with her and left the citadel undefended,” Adaq drew the conclusion.

Shahad nodded. “I was going to get word to you when you stopped to camp but the idiots attacked before I had chance.”

Aziz was worried by the assault. He knew that the Muntiari and a few other Nasir fundamentalists opposed the monarchy and its influence with the ‘godless’ New Sobriuns but he never dreamt that they would actively try to assassinate him. The previous Muntiari opposition had been restricted to occasional public protests outside of the capital and harsh words spoken in private. Nothing like this had ever been attempted before.

“Who could have been behind this?” he spoke rhetorically.

“It’s the Muntiari,” Shahad stated. “White robes to demonstrate their purity, the suicidal manner of their attack and the complete lack of anything identifiable...not even a piece of jewellery or a shred of paper. It has to be them.”

“But who is behind it?” Aziz asked, “Who ordered them to do this? Who gave them the weaponry for the expedition? These things cost money and require organisation,” he said.

Adaq looked at Aziz in a quizzical manner, pointing with his third finger towards Shahad. The signal was an old one that the two had agreed upon in their early teens; it was also simple. Adaq was inquiring as to the

trustworthiness of Shahad. Aziz responded by scratching his right ear, indicating that he trusted Shahad. If had scratched his left ear, Adaq wouldn't have continued.

"It could be Adalella and Duki? Or maybe just one of them acting alone," he suggested. "We know they both had the means to steal the Tabula, they are both very closely tied with the Muntiari..." He let the sheikh consider the possibility.

"But that would mean they knew where I was," Aziz concluded. "If they're on a boat in the Anriac Bay, how could they possibly organise this?" He flung both of his arms in the air to emphasise his point.

"It would mean that there is someone at court in Lunan involved," Shahad suggested.

"Or somebody at your court my lady," Adaq corrected her.

"True," she admitted reluctantly.

A call sounded and the three were ready for battle immediately. They were relieved to see that it was the returning scouting party that the sheikh had sent over the rise to scour for anything of value on the other side of the ridge. Adaq frowned when he saw the six men leading roughly forty camels

down the dune: if there was one thing he hated more than travelling on horseback, it was travelling on a camel.

On battlements of gigantic proportion an elderly scholar peered through a looking glass with unique capabilities. He had witnessed the sea battle despite the vast distances involved and had watched as the nobleman had escaped in a small boat and made for the coast of Heim. He was afraid by what he seen and didn't want to report his findings to his master.

The group had cautiously made their way into the thick undergrowth that bordered either side of the road. Trees with needles that pierced the skin rose towards the heavens with sunlight lending their bark the illusion of silver. Ferns and shrubs made it difficult to cross the forest floor and hid depressions and puddles that continually hampered the progress of the party. Much more suited to life at sea, Henry and the men of the Invincible made slow progress whilst Paul, Lottë and her twin sister were much more suited to the terrain.

"Nearly there," Lottë's twin sister informed the group.

"Nearly where?" Henry asked. "The men are really struggling with this Magda," he informed the woman.

“Here,” Magda said.

The forest abruptly opened up and they entered a clearing. Whilst Paul, Magda and Lottë had visited this place before, Henry and the men of the Invincible stood with open-mouths. The clearing was dominated by a giant fountain, sending water almost four stories into the air and channelling water throughout the settlement. To the east were the ruins of a huge coliseum, large enough to encompass a small village and beautifully ornamented by intricate hieroglyphics that depicted battles lost to history. A series of wooden huts were now scattered around the ground where huge crowds had once been entertained by duelling men. Elsewhere in the clearing were ruins of smaller, less grand villas and there was an incredibly straight road that led towards the east.

“What is this place?” Henry asked Paul and the two women.

“It’s our headquarters,” the two women answered in unison.

“Headquarters for what?” Henry asked as they made their way into the ruins of the coliseum and moved amongst the buildings that had sprung up in the shadow of the once great building.

“Our import and export trade,” Lottë said.

“And what do you trade in?” Paul asked for the prince’s benefit.

Neither of the two women answered but, after wondering between the buildings for a few seconds, it was obvious that the settlement specialised in smuggling contraband and other stolen goods in and out of Rigar. Many of the wooden buildings appeared to be warehouses used to store the smugglers wares which were varied beyond anything that Henry could imagine. As they made their way through the thriving town, Henry spied vats of alcohol, piles of weapons, clothing, racquets for sport and even a live elephant being kept in a pen. It was more varied and organised than anything Henry had come across at market in Partallow and he wondered how the illegal enterprise existed without a local governor closing it down.

As if sensing his question Lottë answered him before he asked. “They need us,” she said.

“Who needs you?” Paul asked. His eyes remained transfixed to the wondrous ruins of the old coliseum, “And why?”

Magda and Lottë laughed in harmony again, much to Paul’s annoyance. “The Senior Governor,” Magda replied.

Elected democratically by the people when the previous Senior Governor dies, the Senior Governor was effectively the ruler of the republic. The position was usually reserved for a candidate from a select number of

families, but a few times in history the position had been held by a commoner. That was the current situation after a war hero had returned home to find himself the most popular figure in the nation.

“How does he need you?” Henry asked, “He has his own quartermasters.”

“He doesn’t need our goods silly,” Magda answered.

Henry was annoyed at being patronised this way but Magda was the only member of their party who didn’t know the prince’s true identity. She had been told that Henry was a rebellious noble who dreamed of battle and was heading a mercenary company to the disputed border with Al-Rigar. Lottë had agreed not to inform her twin-sister of the prince’s true identity on the condition that she received a bonus for her services.

“So what does he need?” Henry asked. “Your incredible intellect or your dashing good looks?” he added sarcastically.

If Magda was annoyed by the comment she didn’t show it. Henry assumed that she was used to being insulted about the large scar on her face and he instantly regretted making the remark. The tall woman simply continued in her arrogant manner.

“We are The Carriers Guild,” she explained to the prince. “If the Governor needs something taking to the front quickly, like supplies or soldiers, we can do it quicker than anybody else.”

“And what about the rest of this?” asked Henry. He obviously meant the dozens of warehouses that littered the clearing.

“Well we have to make a small profit ourselves,” she winked at the prince.

“But doesn’t the Governor know all of the roads that lead to the front anyway?” one of the Invincible’s sailors asked.

“He knows the roads, but he doesn’t know *the* roads,” she quipped. “*Our* roads are the roads left from ancient times; from the Old Empire.”

The sailor laughed at Magda’s response but Henry knew better. Whilst the common folk believed the Old Empire to be something of myth, he had been schooled extensively and knew of their ways. They had possessed technology that could cut through mountains, ford water and make the boulevards invisible to the naked eye. Though his teachers had tutored him on the topic, he had never truly believed that a road could be rendered invisible.

“So you hold the Governor to ransom,” Henry concluded. “If he impedes you from smuggling and trading freely with Al-Rigar, you won’t transport his goods for him?” he asked.

“You offend me Henry,” Magda responded in mock outrage. “We provide an invaluable service to the Republic.” Her eyes’ went wide in exaggerated offence. “But for payment for this priceless service, we are allowed to trade a little without the scrutiny of the Republic’s customs officials.”

Henry was fully aware that he was being made fun of. “The road looks perfectly visible to me,” he quipped.

“Follow me silly,” Magda said. The woman led the way through the throng of smugglers and drunks to the causeway.

Henry had been a little taken aback by the strange woman and her excessive poise. He had met confident women at court several times but they were overly promiscuous, certain that their beauty would find them a powerful husband. However, Magda’s confidence lay in her own abilities, not the capability to find a rich and powerful spouse to hide behind. She moved as gracefully through the crowds of smugglers as she had through the dense undergrowth of the forest, waving to passers-by who greeted her with revere.

A rapier hung at her belt, the weapon of choice for a refined swordsman not a brutal slashing broadsword that was usually affected by outlaws.

“Do you fence lady?” Henry asked.

The woman laughed. “Lady?” she asked.

Henry was a little taken aback by her brashness. “You carry an expensive blade,” he observed. “People defer to you in the street...” he couldn’t think of any additional details but surely these would suffice.

“Ha, you think that makes a person a noble?” Magda asked. Without waiting for a reply, she scrutinised the prince. “I have more reason to presume you’re a noble,” she stated.

“What do you mean?” Henry was worried by how easily the woman had guessed his real station in life.

“Your boots,” she said, “the way your men revere you despite you treating them well and not having to bully them like all other mercenary captains. Your accent.” She paused, looked over the prince once more and said, “Your education.”

“What?” Henry said baffled.

She laughed. “Don’t worry Henry, or who-ever-you-are, your secret’s safe with me.”

Henry was annoyed by the woman’s intelligence and how easily she had seen through his disguise. “You still didn’t tell me if you’re a noble or not.”

Magda turned and looked the prince in the eyes. She was nearly the same height as Henry despite the prince being one of the tallest men in the Royal Navy and her dark brown eyes pierced his green orbs. Henry noticed that her cheekbones were higher than her sister’s and that her tanned skin had a light dusting of freckles. Her scar was a contrasting shade of pink in her otherwise dark angularly featured countenance.

“Of sorts Henry,” she said, “But I’ll leave it to you to decide. Now come along silly, I have to show you something.”

Henry had found the situation entirely uncomfortable and enjoyable at the same time. “Are you always this ridiculous?” he asked.

The nobleman was furious with everything that had transpired. He was livid that his fireball had been deflected, he was enraged that his ship had been sunk and, more than anything, he was irate with Aidan Baines.

Aidan now sported a large red welt on his face where he had been struck by his master. The wound had been infected by means that Aidan couldn't understand and whenever it pleased his master it would burn furiously. He had long wanted to be promoted beyond his means but this was the first time that he was beginning to wonder if he had chosen the right path. Recognising that it was too late to alter from the course he had chosen, he continued to take his anger out on the junior members of his party.

"Where are those two going?" Paul asked Lottë as he watched Henry and Magda walk out onto the causeway.

"I think the young man misses female company," Lottë answered. "It must be nice for him to be with someone who doesn't flatter him for his rank." Paul was forced to agree with Lottë, something that he didn't like to do too often.

Changing the subject, Lottë completely caught him off guard. "How did Aidan Baines steal the Tabula?" she asked.

“Well it’s no surprise Troisieme told you about that,” he said. “Let’s move away from this lot,” Paul whispered, indicating the men of the Invincible who were now being assaulted by hawkers trying to sell their wares.

Paul instructed the men to wait for them in the nearest tavern and moved to the tree line with Lottë. The woman leaned up against a pine tree and asked, “How are you baby brother?”

“Annoyed,” he replied. Though Paul wasn’t related to either Lottë or Magda by birth, they had all been orphans together under the care of Madame Troisieme. Whilst Paul had lost both of his parents before he reached adolescence, the twins had been fortunate enough to know their parents. They had been important nobles who were forced to flee the Republic following the change of the Supreme Governor. Other than this Paul knew nothing about them though, despite his outward dislike, he loved them like sisters. “I thought it was Henry,” he said.

“What?” Lottë asked, “Him?”

“I know...” Paul started, “But it *had* to be a royal.”

“How did Aidan take it?” she asked. “He isn’t a royal.”

“He is...” Paul retorted, “...as good as a royal. His friendship with the King is legendary and he trained all three of the princes.”

“So...” Lottë prompted.

“He had access to areas of the castle that only the royals did. His full title was Duke Evershire; no soldier, official or noble would question seeing him in areas of the palace that he wasn’t supposed to be found in. He could also have used his position to intimidate others and to recruit followers, it all makes sense.”

Henry was awestruck by the perfectly straight road, cutting through hills, crossing rivers and parting the forest until it merged into obscurity with the horizon. “That really is something,” he said.

It wasn’t the first time that Magda had witnessed the reaction. In the past, battle-hardened soldiers of the Republic had been equally as astonished by the marvel. The road was a living piece of history, a remnant from the Old Empire who had miraculously constructed them in harmony with their surrounding environments. “Told you silly,” she said.

“But how do you conceal it from the Governor?” Henry asked. “It’s huge.”

“Look closer,” she said.

The road was wide enough for thirty men to walk abreast; it was paved and had huge drainage trenches running along either side. Henry thought that it would be easy to find, maybe even visible from the top of the citadel in Groβstadt. “It’s impossible,” he said, “A blind man and his mother could stumble across this,” he said indicating the boulevard.

“Look closer,” she repeated.

Henry stared intently at the road, pessimistic that he would notice anything different. But this time he felt something, the same odd feeling he had experienced when Paul had reached out to find their quarry aboard the Invincible: Magda was whispering an incantation and he faintly heard the familiar sound of Manaa being spent somewhere nearby.

Henry watched in wonder as the stone paving gradually took on the physical properties of the surrounding nature. Mineral paving became undergrowth as living forest was transformed before his eyes, great bridges dissolved into running rivers teeming with fish and the contours of the earth returned to their natural gradient. The young prince couldn’t quite comprehend what he had just witnessed.

“There’s nothing there,” he whispered.

“Yes,” Magda said, “Impressed?” She offered her arm to steady the prince.

Without thinking Henry accepted. “That was remarkable,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied simply. “You took it better than most.”

Henry’s knowledge of Manaa was limited but he knew what he had just witnessed dwarfed anything that he had ever seen performed by the court scholars in Rubrumterra or what Paul had achieved at sea. “Can the Republic’s scholars replicate this?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “Only a few can. Are you okay to walk?” she asked.

Henry had been overwhelmed by what he had observed. His court training was instinctively triggered and he distanced himself from his emotions, straightening his back and withdrawing his arm from Magda’s. “I’m fine,” he said.

“That’s another thing,” she said, a smile coming to her lips.

“Another what?” Henry asked confused.

“Another thing that gives you away as a noble,” she joked, “The way that you regain composure so quickly.”

Adaq hated camels. He would rather face the suicidal loons of the Muntiari again than remain in the saddle for a moment longer. The Royal Guardsmen had buried their fallen comrades after the battle, leaving the corpses of the enemy to the scavengers.

Sadly, two of the party had not been able to continue with the quest; their injuries had been too severe. The pair had opted for a quick death at the hands of their comrades rather than risking a slow and painful death from exposure or being eaten alive by the scavengers. Aziz had been visibly poignant at the time but now his military training had taken over and his mind was fixed on the task at hand.

“Defensive formation,” Aziz yelled.

They had been travelling for a day in the direction of the city of Nijan when they had spied another group of the white garbed fanatics in the distance. The enemy had fanned out as if they were searching for something, and the sheikh guessed that it was for him.

“Everybody down,” he ordered but more quietly this time.

The men dismounted from their camels and knelt them down as best they could, though some of the beasts took a few moments to persuade.

Aziz crawled over to where Shahad had dismounted from her mount, returning her longbow and a quiver of arrows that had been confiscated from her earlier and said, “Stay here, the men will guard you.” He looked over at where the white clad men were preparing their camp and added, “If anything goes wrong, take the men to Qahtani. Find my brother and he will protect you.”

Shahad looked like she was about to protest but Aziz spoke over her. “If I am killed the enemy won’t be interested in you or the other men. You’ll be safe,” he assured her.

Shahad wished that there was something she could do to show her feelings for him. Just a swift embrace or even a touch of the hand that would communicate her concern for his safety and how much it meant to her. Unfortunately too many of the Royal Guardsmen were intently watching the exchange and, if an unmarried woman were to perform such an act in public, she would be punished harshly under the strict edicts of the Nasir. All she could say was “hurry back my Shiekh.”

Aziz felt emotion overwhelming him and tried his best to hide how he truly felt.

“You two,” Aziz pointed at two guardsmen, “come with me. Adaq, you’re coming too.”

Adaq was pleased to get as far away from his camel as he possibly could. His beast had been one of the more troublesome in persuading to kneel down; it had also attempted to bite him earlier in the day. Though not prone to suspicion, the advisor was certain that the creature somehow sensed his uneasiness and was taking full advantage of the situation.

“Where are we going Aziz?” Adaq asked as the four men set off.

“We need to get an idea of what we’re up against,” Aziz replied. “If there’re more bands of these soldiers roaming around; we need to know about it.”

The group edged towards the enemy hoard who had dismounted to eat. Looking back they couldn’t see their own force who had managed to conceal themselves in what little cover was offered by the harsh plains of the Rigarian desert. This brought some comfort to Aziz; if he couldn’t see his own men then he was certain that the enemy couldn’t either. When they were little distance from the white garbed men, the four hid behind one of the few shrubs that distorted the monotony of the desert.

“What do we do?” Adaq asked Aziz.

“We put these on,” he said, withdrawing four white garments from his battle satchel.

Adaq rolled his eyes in protest but didn’t articulate his displeasure at what the sheikh proposed for fear of appearing mutinous in front of the other two men.

“And then what?” asked Adaq as he struggled with the clothing whilst trying to remain invisible to the enemy camp.

“We wait,” answered Adaq raising his hand and pointing, “For that.”

Adaq looked out to the west where an angry looking sandstorm was gathering.

The two women had joined Henry’s party of sailors from the invincible in one of the many taverns that had been erected in the ruins of the ancient coliseum. Whilst Henry, Paul, Magda and Lottë made plans, the men of the Invincible drank and gambled with the smugglers.

“This isn’t entirely the way that I planned on spending my life,” Henry said.

The tavern was little more than a large hovel. The bar was nothing more than several planks of wood balanced on two blocks of clay. The floor was a mix of straw and sawdust that had been used to cover the dirt that the wooden building had been constructed over. The gaps between the planks of wood had been filled with daub allowing very few drafts into the warmth of the tavern. Though relatively clean, a faint odour of vomit hung in the air.

Magda laughed. After she had shown him the road she had disappeared for several hours before remerging to meet them at the tavern. The prince had no idea where the strange woman had disappeared to but he suspected that she had been up to no good.

“Where *did* you plan on spending your life?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Henry said.

He was trying his best not to reveal his true identity to the woman; a task that was becoming ever more difficult to achieve.

“But I certainly wouldn’t want to be here,” he waved his arm around.

“Aw,” Magda said. “Poor little rich boy.”

Henry was baffled by the comment. In Partallow he had lived a privileged life by any standards, but he did not indulge himself the way that

Tsuki or New Sobriun nobles did. He had given his life to the navy, fighting for his country and protecting the Rubrumterran people. He also paid his tenant farmers more than most nobles in the island Kingdom and gave generous holidays to his staff. He would even give Nasir workers leave to pray seven times a day.

“What do you mean?” he asked confounded.

“Nothing,” Magda responded. She realised that she had upset Henry and that had not been the intention of her comment. In fact, she had no idea what the purpose of the comment had been. Changing the topic, she asked, “anybody for a drink?”

“Yes,” Paul said. He had enjoyed the exchange between his step-sister and the prince. Though things could have become ugly, he had been certain that it wouldn’t get that far. Despite his ability to manipulate Manaa, his natural intelligence and his education, the thing that had made Paul so successful in his craft had been his instinct. “I’ll have one please,” he said.

“Me too,” Lottë added.

Magda took the opportunity to excuse herself from the table and went to fetch more drinks.

“What?” Henry asked.

His two companions were both staring at him with huge smiles plastered over their faces. Henry, more accustomed to being in command of situations, hated being unsure of himself. The only thing that he hated more than uncertainty was when other people were aware of his.

“What do you two want?” he asked.

Paul and Lottë didn’t pursue the matter further, choosing to turn the conversation to matters of business.

“We should get ahead of Aidan and the thief if we take the old roads,” Paul said. “But we need to be ready to head them off before they get to The Great Wall.”

“Where’s the best place to do it?” Henry asked.

“There are several ways we could go about this,” replied Paul. “We could hit them out in the open, taking them by surprise and hoping that we catch them off guard,” he said holding up one finger. “Or we could find them in a city, either one in Heim or Qahtani, and try to take the scroll in the night.” He extended a second finger.

“I like the idea of a fight in the open,” Lottë suggested. “That way we won’t have to explain ourselves to any local officials should things get out of hand.”

“That’s true,” Henry supplied, “But we would be outnumbered three to one.”

“Hmm...I don’t like the prospect of that,” Paul said. “But it could prove less troublesome than a city battle.”

“The odds aren’t in our favour though,” replied the prince. “And the majority of our men are sailors, not soldiers. They will struggle against hardened mercenaries in a fair fight.”

Magda joined the other three armed with four tankards of the most questionable ale that Henry had ever tasted. “Satisfied?” she asked the prince.

Henry gulped the ale, trying his best to hide his discomfort as the slightly metallic flavoured liquid passed down his throat. “Lovely,” he said.

The sandstorm was not severe by any stretch of the imagination; however it had been fierce enough to force the Muntiari into the shelter of their tents. With no sentries posted, it had proven easy for Aziz, Adaq and the two Royal Guardsmen to approach the encampment without being detected.

The camp had been assembled haphazardly; the men had simply erected their tents wherever it pleased them. They were vulnerable to attack and no

sanitation trench had been dug for the men to relieve themselves in. It was obvious to the casual observer that these men either had no military training or didn't care if they lost their lives when attacked, or, most probably, both.

Adaq rather liked the idea of 'walking amongst the enemy' but the two men that Aziz had selected to accompany them obviously felt uncomfortable with the notion. Quite rightly, they had been ordered to stay about fifty yards from the camp; armed with bows and at the ready to cover the Sheik and his advisors' retreat should it prove necessary.

"This is genius," Adaq said to Aziz. "But what are we going to do next?" he asked.

"We're going to capture a prisoner," Aziz replied. "Then we'll know how many of these lunatics are trying to find me and who told them I was out here."

Adaq was a little taken aback by the comment. He had assumed that they were going to join the conversation of a group of soldiers and endeavour to learn as much as they possibly could about the white clad men and their plans. "How will we go about it?" he asked.

"First we need to find the leader's tent," Aziz replied, "Then we'll kill everybody inside and capture the caliph of this clan."

A little surprised by the sheikh's bold plan, Adaq fell in behind him as they made their way to the centre of the camp. If the advisor had thought it'd take overly long to find the caliph's tent; he was wrong.

A camel skin tipi dominated the camp and was surrounded by half a dozen prize camels that enjoyed the shelter of their own personal tents. It never failed to surprise Adaq how well they treated their prized beasts but how poorly they cared for their wives.

"Follow my lead," Aziz said as he pulled his *eqab* across his face to cover his mouth.

Adaq also covered his face and the pair entered the tent.

"God bless you," Aziz said in the formal greeting of the Nasir.

"God bless you," the portly leader of the Muntiari replied as he bit into a leg of mutton.

The tent was exactly as Aziz had expected it to be. There were no decorations, only the bland interior of the camel skins adorned the tipi. There were two candles lit and three men sat cross-legged on woven rugs around the carcass of a cooked goat. It was clear the men were annoyed by the interruption of their dinner but that they didn't suspect Aziz and Adaq of duplicity. Aziz presumed that the large man who had greeted him was the

leader of the troupe as he had spoken and was sat in the prime location on the floor; the other two must have been lieutenants or other men of rank.

Aziz entered the tent closely followed by Adaq. They had both covered their faces with white *eqabs* as if they were trying to shelter their faces from the sandstorm, but in reality they were concealing their identities.

“What do you need brother?” the leader asked.

“Now!” shouted Aziz.

Before either of them had a chance to react, the two lieutenants lay dead on the floor of the tent. Adaq had skewered one on the end of his rapier, piercing him through the heart and lungs he had died without making a sound. Adaq had fully decapitated his foe, the blade of his broadsword now resting along the throat of the leader.

Adaq disentangled his blade from the corpse as the enemy leader spoke, “Please don’t,” he begged.

“Don’t do what?” Aziz asked.

“Don’t kill me...please...I have money and camels,” the leader snivelled, “I have women...you can have my wives, my daughters...”

“We don’t want any of that,” Aziz responded.

“What do you want? I’ll give you anything,” he begged.

Adaq walked up behind the stout man and hit him hard at the base of the neck with the pommel of his sword. The man’s body snapped forward with the force of the blow and he rolled onto his back, his eyes’ rolled and he slipped into unconsciousness.

“Typical,” Aziz said.

“What?” inquired Adaq.

“These religious preachers...they’re always pathetic cowards,” he concluded. “They’re more than willing to encourage a young follower to give their life in the name of god or to take part in a suicide attack, but the second it’s their neck on the line they just whimper and snivel.”

Adaq nodded in agreement. “So what do we do with him now? He’s too big for us to carry and we can hardly interrogate him here,” he said.

“Wrap him up in this,” Aziz held out one of the woven rugs that the men had been sitting on for dinner, “I’ll go and fetch a camel.”

Adaq’s eyebrow raised but he said nothing about the audacious plan and set about his task. Meanwhile Aziz went outside and returned moments later leading one of the caliph’s prize camels into the tent.

“You brought it in here?” Adaq said, half in amazement half in humour.

“The shorter distance we have to drag this buffoon the better,” Aziz responded. “Feet or head?” he asked.

The two struggled with the comatose man but eventually managed to secure him to the side of the camel. If the beast felt overburdened by the heavy load of the comatose caliph, it endured the discomfort with good grace.

“Right,” Aziz said, “Let’s just cover our face and walk out.”

Pulling the camel behind them, the two stepped out into the sandstorm. Whilst Aziz walked along as if he belonged to the camp, Adaq was incredibly nervous and convinced that they would be caught at any moment.

“What do you think of this mighty beast?” Aziz asked.

Adaq was a little confused by the question at first but, seeing a Muntiari relieving himself nearby, realised that it was a ruse to deter attention.

“She’s a grand one that’s for sure,” he played along, “But I think I have one in my herd that matches her for temperament but surpasses her beauty.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Kamal,” Aziz retorted in mock jest. “Not one camel you possess could even dream of being this beautiful.”

Obviously, camel aesthetics were a regular topic of conversation as, once he had finished relieving himself, the white clad man came over to settle the argument despite having to endure the sandstorm to do so. “She’s a beauty that’s for sure,” the stranger offered, “Excellent lips, good strong teeth, long eyelashes...”

The man’s commentary was interrupted as Adaq thrust a rapier into the base of his spine. The blade passed through the man’s Thoracic, paralysing him before he died a quick death on the sand.

“Quick, help me,” Aziz said.

The two picked up the corpse and dumped it on the camel unceremoniously. On this occasion, they didn’t have the time to spare to wrap the body in a rug; there was nothing to hand and they were out in the open. With the corpse loaded on the camel’s back, the two decided to abandon the ruse and ran back to where they had left the two Royal Guardsmen.

The two guardsmen stood up, arrows notched in their recurve bows that were the preferred weapon of choice for desert warriors. Though not as powerful as the longbows that were the preferred weapon of choice in Sobrius, the weapons were accurate and powerful over middle distances and much more comfortable to travel with.

“Stand down,” Aziz ordered the men as they ran within hailing distance.

The men shouldered their bows, returning their arrows to their quivers and falling in behind the sheikh and his advisor as the quartet sprinted back to the assembled ranks of the Royal Guardsmen. Now that they were out of sight of the enemy camp, they cut loose the body of the enemy soldier and allowed it to fall from the camel.

The sandstorm increased in intensity.

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The men of the Invincible watched in wonder as the living forest transformed into a paved causeway that cut a straight line through the landscape. Flowing water solidified to become bridges, two trenches sunk into the ground on either side of the road and vines transformed into a rail to prevent individuals from falling into the trenches.

Though he had seen the transformation the previous day, Henry again found the spectacle both beautiful and terrifying. The other men struggled to comprehend what they had just witnessed but Paul and the two women

stepped out onto the causeway as if they always opted for this method transport.

“Come along chaps,” Paul said. “Aidan has at least one day on us and we need to overtake them before we even think about doing anything.”

Henry knew that his men were struggling with the concept of travelling by a road that only just materialised in front of them and some of them were visibly shaking at the idea. Sailors were notoriously superstitious and, due to their paltry salary, very rarely came into contact with Manaa manipulation. However, the thought of bringing the mutinous first officer to justice spurned the men on and they took a few tentative steps onto the road.

The prince knew he had to take the initiative. “Follow me,” he said striding onto the causeway. Once Henry was walking along at a good pace and was joined by the more daring men of the Invincible, the rest of the crew joined the party and they started off at a good pace.

“We’ll have the porters lead the mounts for the first couple of miles,” Lottë informed Henry. “Once the men find their feet, we’ll mount up and the porters can return to the coliseum.”

Ignoring the pun, Henry asked, “What is that place called anyway?”

“We just call it the coliseum,” Lottë responded, “That way it could be any coliseum in any town in the Republic. It helps to keep our enemies off our scent.”

“Ah, very clever,” Henry responded. “But who exactly are your enemies?”

“Just about everybody,” Lottë smiled, “and unfortunately they’re also our biggest clients.”

Magda had been listening intently to the exchange, now she offered her opinion. “The Porters Guild as we put them out of business, the Republic itself, the New Sobriuns, the Tsuki...” She petered out.

“The whole world wants to know our secrets,” Lottë said. “With this technology Sobrius could be conquered in a day.”

“Are there roads everywhere?” Henry asked in astonishment.

“No, silly,” Magda answered his question. “Just in the continents of Rigar and Sobrius: Anywhere the Old Empire conquered they built these roads, though many have remained dormant for centuries...we don’t even know if the ones in Rubrumterra and northern Rigar still work.”

If Henry was shocked to learn that an invisible network of roads interlaced his father's Kingdom, he hid it well. "So why are you helping us?" he asked.

"Well..." Lottë started but was interrupted by Magda.

"For money," she said. "Madame Troisieme pays better than anybody else."

"And we always help our little brother whenever he asks," Lottë added.

"Your brother?" Henry asked.

Magda ruffled Paul's hair in the maternal way that only a family member could get away with. Paul slapped his step-sister's hand away playfully and whispered some harsh words in her ear, reminding her that though he loved her very much, he needed to maintain the respect of the Invincible's men.

"Your sister?" Henry looked confused once more.

The remaining Royal Guardsmen, Aziz, Adaq and Shahad had ridden through the night to put as much distance between themselves and the raided camp as was physically possible. They had seen another group of the white clad Muntiari scouring the desert landscape, but had managed to avoid them

by hiding in a wadi cut by a long dead river. There was no way for them to know if the group they had hidden from was the same that they had raided earlier in the day but Aziz was fairly certain that it was not. The direction they had materialised from suggested that they had not given chase and were a different contingent entirely.

Having stopped in a dry gully to make camp for the day, Aziz had ordered the prisoner bound to a chair in the centre of the camp. The fat caliph was still unconscious, so Aziz ordered one of the men to fetch a decanter of camel's urine. The sheikh wasn't being petty by using the foul smelling fluid to wake the captive, water was invaluable in the desert and any used to wake the hostage from his slumber would be considered a waste.

Slosh, the thick yellow-green liquid splattered across the man's face, reviving him from his slumber.

"Where am I?" he asked. "What's that smell?" he added.

"You're my prisoner," Adaq said. "We need you to talk brother or we'll be forced to hang you."

Adaq and Aziz had discussed the best way to go about the interrogation and had decided on the current procedure. Aziz would keep his identity concealed, out of eyeshot from the caliph, and Adaq would lead the lines of

questioning. Adaq's face wasn't well known to people outside of Lunan but statues and portraits of the sheikh could be found in every town, village and city in all Al-Rigar.

"Please don't," the caliph begged, "I'll give you anything," he whimpered pathetically.

Adaq struck the cowardly prisoner across the face with the back of his hand. The blow was intended to shock the prisoner rather than to cause any real damage and it had its intended effect; the man continued to cry and whimpered, "please don't hurt me. I don't know what I've done to you."

The man's reaction pleased Adaq; he clearly had no idea of his identity and still presumed that he had been kidnapped by thieves rather than the Royal Guard. The advisor knew that it was time to start with his line of questioning.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am a simple religious man brother..." he started.

"No!" Adaq said with authority, "What is your name?"

"I'm Dawud Imme Anil Fayak," the man responded.

“I’ve never heard of you,” Adaq responded aggressively. “All these jewels, women and camels you talk of...I think they’re lies.”

“No don’t brother,” he said, looking terrified, “I am caliph of the Sadaza tribe. I can get you anything you want.”

“You’re Sadaza?” Adaq asked.

“Yes. Yes I am,” Dawud responded, clinging at the hope that his family’s name might spare him a lonely death in the desert. “Do you know me?” he asked.

“I know the name,” Adaq replied, pretending that he was deep in thought. “Though I think you’re from the tribal areas...what are you doing here?”

“Oh merciful brother,” the caliph continued, “I am here on the most holy of quests. We are here to rid the lands of the blasphemous sheikh who has plagued us with the ghastly New Sobriuns.”

“But your camp was so small,” Adaq continued. He was a skilled interrogator and had successfully given the caliph the false hope that he would be spared because of his rank. He had also managed to convince the prisoner that he was a simple nomadic thief who prayed on the weak and vulnerable in the desert. The captive had no idea that he was spilling critical information to a

person who would be able to take advantage of the knowledge. “How could you hope to kill the sheikh if you only command a hundred men? When the sheikh travels he takes thousands of Royal Guard with him.”

“No...” the man started. “You don’t understand. He has only a few hundred.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re trying to trick me,” Adaq countered.

“No it’s true. My master told me,” he begged for his life. “My master said they would be few.”

Adaq laughed at the man. “The desert is so large, how could you hope to find one man in all of this?”

“There are many of us brother.” The caliph was starting to regain some semblance of composure now. “We have six parties out; they’re all about the same size as mine.”

“But how do you know the sheikh is here and who’s your master?” Adaq asked.

The shock of the kidnap and the murder of his lieutenants was now wearing off and the caliph asked, “Who are you brother? Why do you want to know this?”

Adaq realised that the caliph suspected him as being a little more than a nomadic brigand who patrolled the desert looking for wary victims. He nodded to Aziz who had stood behind the caliph during proceedings.

Aziz walked around until he stood face to face with the bound Muntiari. He slowly removed the *eqab* until his visage was revealed to the man who had endured the interrogation at the hands of his chief advisor and asked, “Who is your master?”

The caliph didn’t recognize the sheikh instantaneously, but after a moment his eyes went wide with shock.

“You?” he spat, “You blasphemous son of the devil, how dare you...”

“Who is your master?” Aziz asked again, “And how did you know about my departure from Lunan.”

In an act of uncharacteristic bravery, the man attempted to spit in the caliph’s face. However, he only managed to muster a pitiful dribble that pooled in his lap.

“I’ll never tell *you* anything,” he said in defiance.

“That’s a pity,” Aziz said as he drew his broadsword in the blink of an eye.

“No!” the caliph wailed.

But his plea fell on deaf ears. The only sound was the dull thud of a heavy weight hitting the dry sands of the Rigarian desert, his head nestling in the dirt as a fountain of blood cascaded from his slashed neck.

The men had finally come to terms with the nature of the road that they travelled on and had taken the mounts from the porters. The group was making good progress, much to the pleasure of Paul who had been worrying about their lack of advancement earlier in the morning. The party travelled mostly in silence, Lottë and Paul occasionally exchanging words concerning their progress and other trivial matters.

As they neared what Henry had assumed to be a mountain, he realised that the colossal silhouette was manmade. “What is that?” Henry asked.

Magda was the first to respond to the question. “In all honesty,” she started, “I don’t know.”

“It’s an old caravansary of some sorts,” Paul said.

“You don’t know that for certain,” Lottë said. Turning to Henry she continued, “It’s a possibility but we really have no idea.”

“How could such a huge building be just a caravansary?” Henry asked to nobody in particular.

The group had moved into the shadow of the building despite still being over two miles from the structure. Nothing in four continents could compare in size to the construction, not even The Great Wall that the Tsukese had built to severe their connection with the continent of Rigar.

“The Old Empire was massive,” Paul said, “The number of merchants and traders travelling from one city to another would have been considerable. With roadways such as this, most trade would have been carried on horseback rather than by ship.”

Henry acknowledged that Paul’s assumption was sound but that there was a possibility the structure could have been used for something else. “It looks like a citadel to me,” he said.

“It’s a part of the road,” Paul informed the prince. “Whenever the road disappears, then so does the building.”

“What?” Henry asked, obviously shocked by the statement. “Where does it go?” he asked.

“Back into the forest, just like the road,” Paul replied. “I know,” he continued, realising how difficult it was for the prince to comprehend, “it’s quite a sight to behold.”

Henry found the idea difficult to grasp but didn’t mention the impossibility of what he had just been informed of. Instead he returned to the original question, “Haven’t you investigated inside?” he asked Paul.

“We’ve tried...” he started, trying to find the right words. “...but there’s just something in there.”

“What?” asked Henry.

“Paul’s scared of ghosts,” Magda interjected.

Henry thought that Magda was making fun of him, as she often had done since she had joined the prince’s party, but seeing her face, he realised that she was speaking the truth.

“Ghosts?” he asked.

“Not so much ghosts,” Paul answered, “More a lingering presence that I prefer to avoid.”

“What do you mean?” One of the sailors from the Invincible asked.

“Before the Old Empire was lost to civil war, some of the scholars were exploring the possibility of immortality...”

The sailor laughed, an act he instantly regretted following a stern look of reprieve from the prince.

“Continue,” Henry said.

“They had already found ways to prolong life. The last Emperor ruled for nearly three centuries before the war with the pretender. But we don’t know anything more than that...I believe that they were close but not quite there.”

“So you think the presence you feel is an old spirit...an experiment that went wrong?” Henry asked.

“Maybe,” Paul replied. “I really don’t know. It could be anything.”

“We’ll be camping in the courtyard if you want to enter...” Magda teased.

“I think I’ll be fine waiting outside,” Henry retorted.

Aziz waited, his body pressed hard against the ground beneath him. His men had made slow progress during the day and now, as the sun began to set, they had come across another group of Muntiari. He knew that his men

wouldn’t survive another encounter with the fanatics; there were simply too many of them and too few able bodied Royal Guardsmen after their last encounter. He had been pleased that Adaq had been able to determine the number of enemy roaming the desert, but that he didn’t know the identity of the ‘master’ who was trying to assassinate him aggravated the sheikh. He was obviously somebody highly placed at court as very few people were aware of his departure from Lunan and even fewer knew of the sheikh’s destination.

“What shall we do?” Shahad asked.

The hardy noblewoman lay in the sand next to the sheikh. Though it was forbidden for them to touch in public or for Aziz to see more of her flesh other than her face, the pair’s rank enabled them some freedom that wasn’t conceded to the general populace.

“We hope they don’t come this way,” Aziz answered her question. “It doesn’t look like they saw us.”

The two were lay at the top of a precipice that overlooked a small oasis not far from the city of Qahtani. They had headed for one of the insignificant oases as Adaq believed that the Muntiari would be guarding the more frequented passageways to the city. Now that they were committed to this

route they had to find a way to pass several hundred fanatical Muntiari garbed in white who appeared to be waiting at the oasis for a rendezvous.

“Could we pass them in the night?” Shahad asked.

“No,” Aziz answered. “Although discipline isn’t their strongest point the passage is just too narrow. Maybe one or two men could pass through unnoticed but not thirty. We’ll have to think about this.”

The two crawled back several metres before getting to their feet and returning to where the men were waiting for them.

“Did they see us?” Adaq asked.

“No, we got lucky,” Aziz replied. “But they are barring our way. We need to think of a way to get past them,” he added.

“How many are there highness?” asked a corporal who had been promoted to sergeant major as the previous soldier of rank had been killed in the skirmish.

“Around two hundred,” Aziz answered the question. “Forget any idea of fighting our way through. We need to be more subtle.”

“Is it just the Muntiari at the oasis or are there others?” asked Adaq.

“There’s a thoroughly intimidated squad of royal soldiers who are permanently posted there...but only about ten of them,” estimated Aziz. “A few travellers but I think they want to get away as quickly as possible; the Muntiari don’t make the greatest of neighbours.”

“Makes sense,” Adaq muttered. He was clearly deep in thought and Aziz thought it best not to interrupt his advisor who so often got him out of difficult situations.

“Come this way,” he indicated to the acting sergeant major, Shahad and the only surviving officer.

Away from Adaq, Aziz tried to put the situation into perspective with his other advisors. The only way to Qahtani was through the canyon that had been cut by a river long since extinct. The oasis was the sole reminder that a fast flowing waterway once meandered its way through this area of the Rigarian desert, and the oasis itself was only active at certain times of the year. The legacy of the long dead river was the unique canyon that cut a way through the inhospitable terrain and concluded at the city of Qahtani.

The city guarded the canyon passes that led through the inhospitable terrain to the south and, eventually, to Lunan. As it was of strategic importance and one of the larger metropolises in Al-Rigar, its stewardship had been

trusted to one of the sheikh's younger brothers, Alfuhalli. Aziz knew if he could get to Alfuhalli, or Alfie as he was called by family members, he would be safe and could recruit more Royal Guardsmen to continue the march to The Great Wall.

"Once we're in Qahtani we'll have to get to the palace quickly," Aziz said. "These idiots will probably have a presence in the city too."

Qahtani was the second largest city in Al-Rigar, though the design of the city varied greatly to that of the capital's. Lunan was a lonely city, completely isolated from the troubles of the world by the vast Rigarian desert which surrounded it for hundreds of miles on either side. The only small pockets of civilisation near the capital were tiny settlements frequented by the nomadic tribes of the Rigarian desert. In comparison, Qahtani was originally a keep built to prevent raiders from Heim and Tsuki from raiding into the continent proper. As the garrison of the keep had increased in size, so had the population of civilians outside of the battlements. Eventually one of the city's governors, whose name had been lost to history, had built a wall around the vulnerable houses and market places that supported the garrison there. This process had been repeated by successive governors until four outer walls now circled the original keep to protect the metropolis. The result was one of the most secure cities in four continents but also one of the slowest to navigate.

“You think they’ll try an ambush in the city?” the officer asked Aziz.

“Undoubtedly,” he replied. “You saw how willing they were to die when they first attacked us. They are so convinced they’re carrying out god’s work that the notion of death or being identified as traitors doesn’t discourage them.”

“I have some experience of street brawls,” the acting sergeant major interjected.

The sheikh didn’t doubt the man’s claim in the slightest. Aziz presumed that the scars across the man’s knuckles were earned from fighting in a less honourable way than combat and he also suspected that the slight pink line on his left temple had been caused by a bottle. Men of such rank often had a less-than-savoury past but had proven their loyalty to the monarchy. They were fundamental to the efficiency and professionalism of the Royal Army, bullying insubordinate soldiers into line and courageous in battle. Their key quality, however, was their ability to survive.

“What would you suggest we do sergeant major?” Aziz asked.

“Well I don’t know Qahtani,” he started. “But I do know how to win a brawl in a coach house. The key is to use small blades...dirks and knives...I’ve seen men hack their own friends using real blades in a small room.”

“How about archers?” asked the officer.

“One or two at the back can be useful sir,” the sergeant major continued. “But they are best kept to the back. And once the real fighting starts they’d be more use with a knuckleduster than the finest of longbows.”

“Okay,” said Aziz. “But how about running and fighting?”

“That’s probably the best way to do it if we’re going to be outnumbered highness,” the sergeant major said in a thick accent, betraying his lowly birth. “That way they’ll only be able to engage two or three at the rear whilst the rest run-for-it.”

“That sounds better,” the sheikh said. “Don’t worry about the route, I already have one in mind.”

“One that the Muntiari won’t be expecting highness?” the officer prompted.

“Yes captain,” Aziz said.”That’ll be all. Let’s go and see if Adaq has formulated a plan for us to get to Qahtani in the first place.”

As the group turned to leave Aziz called back the sergeant major, “What is your name?” He asked.

“Derek Mulnazi, highness,” the sergeant major replied.

It was as the sheikh expected. When the Rubrumterrans had abandoned their colonies in northern Rigar they also abandoned many Rigarians who had adopted the Sobriun way of life. Many had taken Rubrumterran first names and some had even married into the colonial elite. It was an easy choice for them to make as collaborators would receive beneficial treatment and were sometimes rewarded with positions of authority in the colony. The Mulnazi were a tribe who had fled to Lunan following the withdraw for fear they would be persecuted by those who had remained loyal to the Rigarian life and strict Nasir doctrine.

“Thank you sergeant major, you can continue about your business,” he dismissed the man.

The officer and sergeant major returned to the men allowing Shahad and the sheikh to rejoin Adaq who still seemed to be deep in thought.

“Any ideas?” Aziz asked Adaq.

“You’ve inspired me Aziz,” the advisor said.

“That’s a first,” Aziz quipped. “Isn’t it your job to inspire me?”

Adaq laughed. Though Aziz was blessed with a sharp mind, Adaq was remarkably intelligent and far surpassed most other members of the Rigarian

court. He had proven himself time and time again and was one of the reasons that Aziz had been able to keep a grip on the throne.

“I think it’s time for us to disguise ourselves again,” he suggested.

“How so?” asked Shahad.

“Do you fancy playing a slave?” Adaq suggested to Shahad.

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The group made camp in the vast courtyard of the citadel that rose up like a mountain above them. Henry and the other men of the Invincible were in awe of the structure; very few people in four continents had seen anything as impressive for centuries. It wasn’t only the scale of the building that impressed the men; the building had been intricately engraved by long dead craftsmen. Their artwork depicted alien plants and cities that no longer existed; battles that had lasted for years and rulers whose names had been lost to history. But it was the odd presence that seized the men’s attention more than anything else. The men felt that their every move was being scrutinised by an invisible watchfulness that haunted the ancient building.

“Have you ever been in?” Henry asked Paul and the two women.

“What?” Magda seemed caught off guard by the question. “In the keep?”

The only opening to the structure was across the courtyard from where the party had chosen to make camp. The archway was equally as large as the rest of the structure and Henry estimated that the palace in Partallow could easily be engulfed by the vast entrance.

“Yes,” Paul replied. “But not far.”

“Ha. You barely took twenty paces inside before you turned around and fled,” Magda jested.

Paul didn’t seem ashamed of his cowardice. “Well how far did you get dear sister?” he asked.

Magda’s cheerfulness turned to chagrin as she responded, “I never felt the need.”

Paul, Henry and Lottë laughed amongst themselves as the striking woman blushed crimson red. Her reddening visage exaggerated the scar that dissected the left side of her face and Henry couldn’t help but wonder what had caused the only blemish of her beauty.

The group continued to chat around the fire as the sailors of the Invincible tried to get some rest but many of them continued to glance warily into the gloom of the keep's entranceway. Eventually, the two women and Paul retired to their respective tents whilst Henry took the first watch.

He sat with his back to the fire, so not to ruin his night vision, and let the warmth of the flames heat his back in the chill of the night air. It wasn't quite winter yet and he was further north than he usually would be at this time of the year, but a biting chill was beginning to creep into the autumn air. Scouring the courtyard for any potential threat, he finally realised that exhaustion had overcome the men and their fear of ghosts and phantoms. They had had succumbed to fatigue. He was pleased to see that they were getting some rest; the following week would be an arduous few days of travel and they needed to be able to fight when they arrived at their destination. The prince still felt uncomfortable with camping in the courtyard but Paul had assured him that he had stayed there dozens of times before and had never encountered any spirits of long dead emperors. Lottë and Magda had also reassured Henry but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being observed.

The prince got up to stretch his legs and walked the circumference of the camp. He could hear the snores of several men and, seeing that the fire was dying down a little, decided to fetch more wood for the dwindling flames. He

made his way over to the packhorses where the wood was stored to keep it dry when he saw movement in the corner of his eye. In an instant the prince's sword was free from its scabbard and pointing towards the source of the movement.

Aziz couldn't help but laugh at his old friend and trusted advisor: he looked preposterous. Adaq had forced twenty five of the men to dress in rags and cover their bodies in dirt as best they could. The men had then been bound by the remaining ten soldiers who were to pose as mercenary guards escorting the slaves to market in Qahtani. The sole remaining officer would masquerade as the slave trader and Shahad would undertake the role as the slave master's wife. Adaq had chosen to be a slave, should one of the Muntiari choose to interrogate the captives to confirm their story, and Aziz would act as a guard.

Adaq knew that the Muntiari were expecting a party of a hundred Royal Guardsmen escorting the sheikh, not a small ragged band of slaves being escorted to market by their mercenary captives and their master's wife. He was fairly confident that the ruse would work but it was exceedingly risky and some of the men disliked the concept of covertness.

“What’s so funny?” asked Adaq.

“Nothing,” Aziz responded trying his best to stifle his laughter. “When are we going to make our move?”

Adaq took a brief look around at the men and the packhorses that now carried their armour and weaponry that the ‘slaves’ had given up. Adaq had devised a cover story to account for the presence of the military equipment that he had drilled into each of the men for their specific roles. They were prisoners of war, taken from the border with the Ferocians, a tiny mountainous region to the south which had declared independence from Al-Rigar. Royal forces were currently involved on too many fronts to reclaim the lost territories of the fierce hill men but it was widely known throughout the Kingdom that skirmishes took place on a daily basis between the rebels and Rigarian forces.

“Now,” Adaq answered the sheikh’s question. “I think everything’s in order.”

Aziz’s character changed as he grasped that the next few hours would be a defining moment of his reign. He was no stranger to risk, having spent most of his early career fighting in the army, but he was fully aware that this was a

fight that they couldn't win. The sheikh ordered the men into action and they formed up.

Shahad sat side-saddle on her camel, a *niqab* covering her face from view and only her dark eyes showing. Usually she opted to show the entirety of her face, a fashion that had been adopted by the bolder women in the Kingdom, but she had decided that her purpose would be better served by sporting more traditional dress in the presence of the Muntiari. Next to her sat the officer, posing as a rich merchant, and behind them the 'slaves' surrounded by their 'guards' and finally the packhorses. As the ruler of the Alnaizi Oasis, Shahad was accustomed to such slave caravans passing through her domain and she had to admit that the Shiekh's soldiers gave the impression of such a group.

"Move out!" called Aziz.

The gloom of the entranceway was infinite. Henry couldn't see anything in the dark but he was positive that something had disturbed the peace of the ancient structure. He wasn't sure what he had seen and briefly considered the possibility that it had been a large animal like a deer or even a wild boar but then he realised that animals shunned the place. In the light of day he had

watched as birds had dramatically altered course to avoid flying over the building and the horses had shied away from the structure in terror when the men had tried to picket them nearer to the entranceway than they currently resided.

Again there was a glimmer of light deep within the gloom of the keep and Henry knew that something stirred inside the ancient building. He edged towards the entrance until he stood at the threshold and then he froze, gripped with terror.

"Henry," whispered a bodiless voice.

The prince couldn't move. Every fibre of his being wanted to run and keep running until he was thousands of miles away and the building was only a dim memory, but he couldn't. An unnatural force had rooted him to the spot, preventing him from escaping the ordeal.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The voice was much more than a whisper now and Henry thought that it originated from somewhere very close to him. *"Henry,"* the voice repeated.

"What-t-t?" Henry's speech shook with fear.

Before he had time to understand what was happening, Henry was flying forward. Rain slashed across his face as he accelerated into the keep at a rate of speed that he couldn't comprehend. He moved unimaginably quickly; faster than a horse could gallop, then faster than a diving eagle; his surroundings blurring into one grey vision as the rain whipped the flesh from his skin. . *I'm going to crash into the back of the building*, he thought to himself. He closed his eyes as he could no longer stand the pain of the tears tearing at his eyeballs. He called out in fear but to no avail and then realised; *I'm going to die.*

Henry stopped. He was somewhere else. He was sometime else.

Everywhere he looked people were going about their business dressed in white sheets that hung off one shoulder. An alien presence in his mind informed him that the strange item of clothing was called a *Toga* and that they were the citizens of a long dead city. Looking around Henry saw that he stood in a market place, larger than any in four continents. To his left rose a beautiful citadel, the same size as the building he had been sucked into but it stood in a different place. The same alien presence informed him that he was in Rigar, but it wasn't the desert wasteland that Henry had visited as a child. A river dissected the city in two and flowed into a dam that distributed the freshwater

across vast green plains that supported crops and cattle for as far as the eye could see.

“Where am I?” he asked of a nearby merchant who was tending his market stall.

He can’t hear you, the disembodied voice informed him. *You can only observe.*

“Observe what?” he asked but received no answer.

Deciding that he couldn’t remain in the market indefinitely, Henry walked forward. At the same moment a basket of apples toppled from the window of a terraced house and the prince instinctively ducked and cocooned his head in his arms to protect himself. The apples passed right through him as if he were a ghost, hitting the ground with an audible thump.

Am I dead, Henry thought to himself. *Is this the afterlife?* He whispered out loud.

He didn’t have much time to dwell on the notion as the peace of the city was interrupted by a bell, the sound of which carried across the large metropolis. Instantly the atmosphere changed as people began to run for their homes, gathering their belongings and panicking in the chaos that followed. Soldiers emerged from barracks, running hard to take positions on the giant

battlements that protected the citizens from those on the other side of the wall.

Who are they fighting? Henry thought. He couldn't see anybody on the other side of the wall and the city's soldiers were doing nothing but making ready.

"To the west," he was informed.

Henry shifted his eyes in a westerly direction and his mouth fell open with dread. The fireball that had been directed at the Invincible was but a grain of sand in comparison to the blanket of flame that enveloped the fertile plains to the west of the city. A mantle of flame rolled across the landscape; destroying crops, burning cattle alive and boiling the river as it made its way towards the city. Henry could see people in the flames, those who hadn't been fortunate enough to have heeded the warning signal in time.

Henry felt something. He always knew when Manaa was being manipulated but this was different. Usually he felt a slight tingle deep in his being, but on this occasion his entire body felt like it was vibrating. The sensation was almost overpowering but he managed to retain some semblance of composure. And then he realised. The soldiers on the walls of the city were combining their minds to try and stop the wall of fire from swallowing the

town. Tens of thousands of minds were pitting their strength against the wall of flame, a feat that hadn't been attempted for millennia.

The wall of flame hit an invisible domed shell that surrounded the city, throwing several hundred of the magical defenders from their positions on the ramparts to their deaths on the floor below. Then the flame began to solidify, the magic of the defenders was countering the threat but at a terrible price: more and more of the city's defenders fell from the fortifications, killed by the exertion. It took an eternity, and spent the lives of thousands, but finally the entireties of the flames were engulfed in ice. A cheer of joy was echoed by the defenders as the ice was shattered into a million fragments.

However, their elation didn't last long. A terrible host had crept behind the wall of flame, hundreds of thousands strong, which now scaled the walls to greet the defenders with blades of steel. The soldiers sworn to protect the city were quickly cut down by the mammoth swarm of enemies who showed no mercy in the face of the weakened defenders.

"What is this?" Henry asked the narrator. *"So many are dying, they command such power!"*

It's the past, the alien presence informed him. *The start of the Shadow Wars that would bring our empire to an end.*

Before he could ask another question the prince was flying forward again. This time however, no rain stung his face; only flames licked at his ankles but he couldn't feel their heat. He could feel the skin on his face stretching as his fragile body tried to adjust to the velocity at which he travelled. Just as he thought his skin would be torn from his skeleton; he stopped somewhere else.

"Halt," one of the soldiers clad in white held up his arm

The 'slave caravan' came to a stop and the officer posing as a merchant said, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Nothing brother, we just need to check your cargo," the officious young Muntiari responded.

"Under what authority?" the officer inquired.

"The crown," the young man replied.

Aziz tightened his grip on the reigns of his camel in anger. He detested the fact that the insurgents were using his authority to conduct their search for him and to bully his subjects into line. It was a problem that was becoming ever more an issue in Al-Rigar, as some more progressive pockets of the

populace endeavoured to live more liberal ways of life. The Muntiari would exploit their privileged position with the Nasir and royal hierarchies to exercise authority over the people despite Aziz's recent efforts to distance himself from the radicals.

For the moment, however, the sheikh's party was outnumbered seven-to-one and in no position to confront the enemy. The officer simply responded, "as you like."

Around thirty of the white clad men wandered into the caravan train and began searching through the packhorses and amongst the slaves for any contraband or signs of the sheikh. It was obvious from the lethargic and unorganised way they went about the task that they had little military training. It was also evident that they didn't suspect the 'slave caravan' of anything untoward.

As the men sifted through the caravan, the speaker continued to interrogate the officer. "Where are you coming from?" he asked.

"We're coming from the Ferocian border," the officer replied. "These men are bound for Qahtani along with my other wares."

It was not unusual for a merchant to specialise in more than one product and the combination of 'looted' armour and slaves was a common

amalgamation. Soldiers captured fighting the Kingdom of Al-Rigar would usually be stripped of their weapons prior to being sold into slavery. Forced labour was a common practice in the four continents, only Rurumterra had made the custom illegal.

“What’s this?” one of the Muntiari said holding up a garment of women’s clothing.

“It’s my wife’s,” the officer played his part beautifully. “...and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t fondle it like that.”

“We’ll have to impound it,” the leader of the Muntiari said. “It’s forbidden.”

Under strict Nasir doctrine, women’s clothes were not to be displayed in public. Although most of the populace ignored the edict as being ridiculous, there were still conservative factions who adhered to the statute.

“If you must,” the officer resigned.

Aziz, having been subject to a privileged upbringing, found the deed preposterous and bit his tongue to prevent himself from objecting. Like any Rigarian, he was a devout Nasir but he believed that the religion needed to progress and his father had protected him from the extreme policies of the Muntiari.

After the item had been confiscated by the man and the other soldiers had finished their search of the packhorses, the leader informed them that they could, “move on.”

The officer thanked the leader of the Muntiari and the party moved past the oasis and onto the trail that led to Qahtani and the sheikh’s younger brother. Despite Adaq’s protests, Aziz rode up next to the officer to congratulate him on maintaining the masquerade so perfectly.

They had barely progressed a quarter of a mile down the road when they encountered a second, smaller group of Muntiari radicals clad in white.

“Halt,” one of the Muntiari ordered.

“We have already been searched by your colleagues at the oasis,” the officer informed the overly eager fanatic.

The man looked visibly disappointed that his services weren’t required and said, “very well. Continue.”

As the ‘slave caravan’ made to pass the group of soldiers, the man stopped and turned to look at the riders of the lead three camels again. His eyes didn’t linger on either the officer or Shahad, but his gaze shot straight to Aziz. As recognition flooded into his eyes the sheikh raised his crossbow and fired the bolt into the man’s chest.

Seeing their comrade killed, the remainder of the Muntiari party attacked.

Henry found himself in a large stone auditorium. The ostentatiously carved stone steps were full of important looking people adorned in togas, gemstones and precious metals; lending them the appearance of nobility. Over a thousand eyes were fixed upon a dais at the front of the auditorium where a man clad in gold armour held court with the people of the city. Henry was standing slightly to the left of the man.

“Order,” he bellowed. His voice carried over the crowd of assembled nobility, magnified by what Henry could only assume to be Manaa. “We must have order.”

The crowd fell silent as the man stood up to address them.

“It has been twenty-three years since the pretender Caligula sacked the northern territories and took them as his own,” the man started. “Since then he has killed my father, Emperor Diocletian, made several attempts on my life and marched dozens of times against the southern territories. We know he has stolen knowledge from the Tabula but that he longs to possess the artefact for his own and wield its power against the entire world.”

As Henry listened to the monologue, the alien presence within his consciousness supplemented his knowledge with information that wasn't spoken. The messenger informed him that the war with the pretender was going badly and that the Emperor was resigned to losing the struggle as the southern territories were exhausted after a generation of war.

The oration continued, "...we can no longer continue the fight. Our northern garrisons are depleted and many have fled seeking refuge elsewhere. *When* Caligula breaks through he will slaughter every person who stands in his way until he finds the Tabula."

Again the consciousness supplemented the prince's knowledge. Henry learned that Caligula had been a great general of the Old Empire. He had destroyed an invasion from the eastern continent and had been eager to pursue the savages back into their homeland and add territories to the empire. Emperor Diocletian had stood in his way, claiming that the savages weren't ready to be exposed to the might of the empire's mages and the size of their army. An argument had broken out between the two and Caligula had been banished to rule in the north, taking his army with him.

"Every one man in ten will be free to flee the empire with their families," the emperor informed the gathered council. "They will be chosen by lottery.

The remaining men will be conscripted into the army and will march north, with myself at their head, to confront Caligula once and for all."

There was a stir amongst the crowd after the emperor had finished speaking. The gathered nobles spoke amongst themselves and the alien presence informed the prince of their topic for discussion, *"They know that nine out of ten of them will die."* The nobles continued to talk amongst themselves but, to Henry's astonishment, they remained quite calm and none seemed to protest against the emperor's edict. *"The war had hardened them,"* the alien presence informed him. *"These men and women had all seen their parents disappear to fight against the pretender in the north...nothing shocked them anymore."*

"But they're all going to d..." Henry started but was interrupted.

Again he flew forward at an implausible velocity. The prince wished he could become accustomed to the sensation but it was impossible. Again, he closed his eyes to protect them and was just beginning to call out in pain when his journey came to an end.

Opening his eyes, Henry was greeted by carnage. Millions of mutilated corpses littered the ground in every direction. Looking closer, the prince

realised that the men and women had lost their lives from a multitude of different injuries. Some men had simply been killed by sword strokes, others had been struck by arrows but many had been burnt to death, crushed or ripped apart limb from limb.

As he inspected the wounds of a particularly beautiful female soldier who had endured her right arm being torn from her torso, Henry heard an explosion in the distance that was quickly accompanied by a mushroom cloud. *"We need to go over there,"* the alien presence informed Henry. Henry's body almost slid along the floor to the point of the explosion. The prince couldn't quite explain how he arrived there but it happened incredibly fast and he didn't move his feet. *"You willed yourself to this part of the vision,"* he was informed.

Henry had transported himself by sheer force of will to where the fighting was at its thickest, and was horrified. Men and women were slaying one another in droves. On one occasion he watched as a woman started to incarnate, only to be skewered by a spear before she could unleash the energy of her efforts. As the spearman stabbed her, the energy she had just gathered visibly travelled down the spear and the man burst into flame. It was difficult to determine which soldiers were fighting for the pretender and which were fighting for the usurper but the prince could discern some kind of battle plan

from the chaos. It appeared that the soldiers clad in white were slowly pushing those in purple back into the keep that they must have emerged from to meet the enemy. *"The Emperor was losing,"* the consciousness informed him.

Henry watched as the conflict came to a head and thanked fate for sparing him from such a battle. There were giants, held captive by conjured chains, who were helpless but to act on behalf of their captors. They ploughed through the soldiers clad in purple, ripping their limbs from their bodies and crushing them beneath their clubs and feet. Occasionally several of the white clad soldiers would band together and shatter the magical chains that enabled the enemy to act as their puppet masters. This would usually result in the giants turning on their old masters before fleeing from the battlefield, destroying everything in their path. Other creatures, long since forgotten in the histories' of man, were also bent to the designs of the usurper's soldiers.

The butchery of the battle continued for some time, the soldiers of the pretender gaining the upper hand and continually pushing the emperor's soldiers back into the large citadel. However, abruptly, the pace of the battle changed. The same man from the moot in the previous vision erupted from the gateway of the giant keep. He was glorious in his golden armour and bore a mace of impossible proportions. Swinging the weapon with rage he slew two giants, who were being driven into the keep by their magical captors, in one

stroke. The emperor swung again and six of the enemy soldiers flew thirty feet into the air and crashed back into their ranks. A cluster of the pretender's scholars began chanting before unleashing the power of their combined minds and a titanic quantity of Manaa at the emperor, but their attack was deflected back towards them by his golden armour. The group of men screamed in pain as they were consumed by the magical blue flames that had been intended for their target.

Again and again the emperor swung with the giant weapon, killing a huge number of the enemy and his armour deflecting all assaults, magical and mundane, as he progressed. He had managed to beat a pathway through the enemy soldiers, thousands lay dead in his wake and the tide of the battle began to swing in the favour of his men.

But again the pace of the battle changed.

A bright white arrow shot towards the emperor. It was the size of a grown man and travelled more slowly than Henry was accustomed to. As it approached the emperor, it slowed down further until it came to a standstill. *Its Caligula,* Henry was informed as the arrowhead materialised into a tall man clad in ivory armour.

The rest of the battle came to a halt as the soldiers took up position to regard the spectacle. Within moments a flurry of blows were exchanged between the two, their weapons moving faster than the eye could follow. Caligula was clearly the better man in combat but the emperor possessed a greater knowledge of Manaa and was able to stop several of his blows by solidifying the air to deflect the slashes of his flaming sword.

The pretender bore the imperial crest on the chest of his ivory armour, looking every part the leader of the Old Empire. His face was scarred from previous campaigns and he stood a head taller than his adversary. He didn't wear a visor, so it was possible to view his snarling face as he tried his best to defeat the emperor.

After several minutes of trading savage blows, the pretender managed to catch the emperor's mace with his blade and disarm Diocletian's son, bringing the man to his knees. Before receiving the final blow, the defeated emperor whispered something to himself and a burst of energy flew out of his body, atomising everything in its path, bringing the pretender's life to an end. The ball of energy continued to grow in size as Henry left the vision, again flying forward at remarkable speed.

The forces were evenly matched in number but many of the Royal Guardsmen were still bound after their ruse.

“Shahad,” Adaq said as he engaged two Muntiari at once. “Get the rest of the men free.”

The striking noblewoman jumped down from her camel and landed deftly on her feet. In one fluid movement she knocked an arrow and shot one of the two men opposing Adaq as she ran to free the false slaves. She dropped her bow and pulled a long hunting knife from her belt that she wore over the top of her concealing clothing. Shahad freed the first man who immediately ran to a packhorse to retrieve his sword and join the fight. After she had repeated the process several times, the freed men helped to unbind their comrades and all of the ‘slaves’ were soon liberated to join the melee. Seeing that the men were now ready for battle, Shahad knocked another arrow and looked for a target amongst the grappling bodies.

Aziz had been overwhelmed as the white clad soldiers of the Muntiari had all rushed towards him at the outset of the skirmish. His men had done their best to defend him but many had paid with their lives and he bore a

gashed arm despite their efforts. Fortunately the enemy were as undisciplined and as willing to die as they had been during the sheikh's first encounter with them.

Currently Aziz was fighting four opponents with the aid of one of the Royal Guardsmen and it was going badly. The tide of the clash changed when a cloth yard shaft lifted one of the soldiers from his feet; Aziz presumed that Shahad had joined the melee. He knew that he would be forced to punish her for becoming involved again but having a capable archer at the rear would greatly improve their chances of survival. The man's death gave Aziz the room that he needed to manoeuvre in and, side-stepping to the left to avoid an enemy soldier's thrust, he feinted high at another enemy soldier before slashing him across the chest. His companion, the only remaining officer with the party, had successfully engaged the other two adversaries, allowing Henry to dispatch them at whim.

More and more of the 'slaves' joined the battle and the guardsmen's training, discipline and experience gave them the advantage and the Muntiari began to fall more frequently. As was the case during the last encounter, when it was obvious to the Muntiari that they were defeated they chose to throw themselves on their own swords rather than risk capture.

With the skirmish at an end, Adaq approached the sheikh and said, “More fanatics?”

“Yes,” replied Aziz. “How did we fare?” he asked.

“Only seventeen men capable of moving,” he replied. “We’ll also need to get going quickly. There’s no way that the soldiers at the oasis didn’t hear this.”

“Agreed,” the sheikh responded. “How many of the injured won’t be able to walk?”

“Two,” Adaq reported.

“See to it.” Aziz told his advisor. “The rest of you,” he addressed the remainder of the soldiers, “get your weapons and supplies, enough for three days. You have five minutes.”

The canyon became a flurry of activity as Adaq walked over to the two injured men who rested with their backs to a boulder. One of the men was unconscious but the other was able to talk, though his speech was impeded by blood bubbling at the corners of his mouth. Without even looking up the man said, “just do it sir.”

Adaq grimly slit the throat of the injured man. He despised having to carry out such a mortifying act but he would rather the man died a quick and

painless death at the hands of his comrade rather than being tormented and tortured by the depraved fanatics. He took one look at the other man and didn't need to check to see if he was living. His chest no longer moved up and down.

The men had been so caught up in the skirmish and making preparations to move out that none of them had noticed Shahad putting away her bow and jumping up onto the camel that had carried her thus far. Aziz smiled at her, happy in the knowledge that he wouldn't be forced to scold her in front of his men again.

The men continued to make ready, collecting weaponry and dressing in their travel armour as well as securing supplies and additional mounts so that they could make haste. When they had neared their preparations, the sound of camel's cloven-hooves on hard rock echoed around the canyon.

"We move out now," Aziz commanded.

The men quickly finished their preparations and mounted their camels, leaving behind the packhorses to act as a barrier and slow down the pursuing Muntiari. Aziz knew that with a large enough head start he'd be able to travel to Qahtani without having to turn and fight the chasing enemy. The Muntiari may be fanatical to the extreme but they were poorly organised and equipped.

He didn't think they would be able to sustain their hunt for the sheikh over a prolonged period in the baking heat of the Rigarian desert.

Taking a quick glance around the narrow passageway littered with dead bodies, Aziz gave the order to move out.

Henry regained consciousness, his senses devastated by the visions that he had just endured. He gulped in the air and tried to come to terms with the ordeal he had just experienced. Gradually, control of his limbs returned to the prince and he struggled to his feet, disorientated by everything he had suffered. *What just happened?* he thought to himself. Henry knew that the experience hadn't been real, the flames hadn't burnt him and the apples that had passed through his body hadn't left a single bruise.

However, the prince was also aware that the visions he had experienced had been echoes of the past; brought upon him by an ancient consciousness that wished to prevent humanity from repeating its mistakes.

"Are you ok?" asked a familiar voice.

"Yes Magda," he responded despite feeling utterly exhausted.

"What happened?" she asked. "I saw you collapse."

“How long was I out for?” he changed the subject.

“Seconds,” she responded. “I heard you draw your sword so I came to help. You were pointing it in the direction of the keep when you fainted.”

“Just seconds?” Henry asked in confusion.

“Yes,” there was obvious concern on her face. “I thought you had been hit by an arrow,” she said peering into the gloom of the large structure.

“No...” he started, “I must have slipped on something.”

“Hmm...” Disbelief was evident on the face of the attractive woman. “Slipped so hard that it brought tears to your eyes?” She inquired.

Henry put his fingertips to his cheeks and was astonished to when he felt moisture trailing down his face.

“I won’t ask anymore right now Henry but I know something happened here.” she said pointing to the floor. “You aren’t the only person with secrets.”

The woman turned to walk off when Henry said, “I don’t know what happened...but when I do I’ll tell you.”

“I know you will Henry,” she replied.

Magda made her way back to the tent that she shared with Lottë, giving him some time to contemplate what he had just witnessed. *Was it a warning?* he thought to himself. He had been shown the power of the Tabula first hand, what it had done in the past and the clout it could bring to the battlefield. When the alien presence had touched his mind he had felt the reluctance that the emperor had felt toward unleashing the knowledge contained within it. He also knew that the emperor had only employed the knowledge at the end of the battle as a final resort to rid the Old Empire of the pretender and his army..

Henry took a long glance into the gloom and thought he saw the resplendent figure from his visions retreat into the darkness: it was the emperor wearing his golden armour.

The Muntiari had been pursuing Aziz and the guardsmen for a day and a night, not allowing them to stop and rest once. They were currently trailing by about three miles but had managed to close on them twice during the past few hours. One Royal Guardsmen had lost his life to a stray arrow during the exchange and so had a dozen white clad fanatics but over one hundred enemy soldiers still occupied their saddles.

“We can’t keep this up for much longer sir,” the officer said to Adaq. “The camels will give out soon.”

Adaq wasn’t the expert in military affairs that the officer was, but he was an authority in matters of trade and knew when camels were near exhaustion. Despite the soldiers each taking a spare mount and rotating them for the past day; the beasts hadn’t had a chance to rest or drink and some of them were already looking near to death.

“We’re still a day and a half out,” he informed the officer.

“Do you think they’re falling further behind?” the officer asked Adaq.

Adaq looked behind him and realised that the Muntiari had now appeared smaller than they previously had; he estimated that they were trailing them by around four miles. The dust cloud had diminished too, suggesting that they had stopped.

“Derek,” Adaq called as he brought his camel to a halt.

“Yes sir?” the sergeant major said as he cantered over to the advisor.

“What do you make of that?” Adaq asked the sergeant major.

“They’re putting up for the night,” Derek concluded immediately. “I don’t think this lot are bright enough to try and fool us.”

The others had also stopped, confused as to why three of their party had brought a halt to their advance.

Aziz trotted over on his camel and asked, “what’s amiss?”

“They’ve stopped for the day,” Adaq informed the sheikh. “And the camels are exhausted.”

Aziz knew that the camels desperately needed to be rested before the final push for Qahtani. He also held the Muntiari in higher regard than the rest of his men and didn’t want to fall prey to their duplicity. Looking forward, he spotted an outcrop of rocks that forced the canyon into a bottleneck where only two or three men could pass freely.

“We’ll make camp there,” he said pointing toward the outcropping. “But we’ll dig a trench on this side in case they try something whilst we’re sleeping.”

The men didn’t show their displeasure at being instructed to build a trench after a day and night without sleep, but Aziz was more than aware that they weren’t looking forward to the prospect of manual labour.

“We’ll all contribute,” he said. “Private,” he said pointing to a young soldier, “you are our sole sentry, keep your bow and stay here. If you see any movement before we finish our work shoot one arrow and come running...quickly.”

The man seemed buoyed that the sheikh had singled him out and jumped down from his saddle and pulled out his recurve bow. “Yes my sheikh,” he acknowledged the order.

The rest of the Royal Guardsmen made the short journey across to the outcropping and, with the aid of the Sheikh and Adaq, began to dig the trench that would serve as their protection. Having two members of the aristocracy, one being a royal, aid in such menial tasks was highly unorthodox but a trait that had earned Aziz the respect of his men. Despite her protests, the sheikh had refused to allow Shahad to assist the men in the undertaking.

With all of the men hard at work the trench took less than thirty minutes to excavate, the dirt being piled up on the other side to form a small stockade for them to shelter behind. The scout was recalled when the work was finished, reporting that the Muntiari were settling in to shelter from the heat of the day and that he’d seen nothing to indicate any aggression. The sheikh thanked the young man and rewarded him by excusing him from watch that day. The acting sergeant major detailed three men, armed with recurve bows, to the first watch and organised the rota for the remainder of the day. Aziz only planned on staying for five hours, allowing the men a few hours sleep each and the camels a suitable period of rest. With his work complete, Aziz passed out in his armour.

A loud shout woke Aziz from his slumber. Adaq, who also shared the tent with the sheikh, sat up so abruptly that he became disorientated.

“What was that?” the advisor asked.

The pair of them heard the shout again and, scrambling to acquire their weapons in the confined space, made ready for the inevitable.

Aziz was the first to exit the tent and, seeing the acting sergeant major racing towards the temporary battlements, asked, “what’s happening?”

“I don’t know sir,” came the reply. “But I’m pretty sure it’s the Muntiari.”

Aziz fell in behind the sergeant major as the pair raced to where the shout had originated from. Adaq had also emerged from the tent and, along with the other remaining men of the Royal Guard, sprinted to the dirt stockade. All of the men and Shahad, just fewer than twenty in number, arrived at the battlements armed with bows.

“What is it corporal?” Aziz asked of the man detailed to guard the barricade, but he needn’t have bothered.

On the other side of the barrier, just out of bowshot, around a hundred men clad in the white robes of the Muntiari were gathering to attack the position.

Aziz knew that they had to hold the enemy here. The nature of the geography within the canyon didn't allow for another defensible position and they had erected a barricade that might be able to hold such a force. He was pleased that none of the enemy held any shields; they would vulnerable to arrows in their approach to the guardsmen's position.

"You have to leave highness," the officer said politely to the sheikh.

"No," Aziz replied. "If I flee on my own I will be as good as dead. There are more of these fanatics waiting for me in Qahtani and I won't be able to fight them off alone. They only outnumber us five-to-one here and we have the advantage."

"Sorry highness," the officer apologised for his fervour.

Aziz was loathe to dress down the officer in such a way and truly felt moved by the man's loyalty, but he had to instil some confidence in the remaining Royal Guards.

"Sergeant Major!" Aziz called.

"Yes highness?" came the response.

"Could you please see to the men."

“Yes sir,” the bruiser said with a small grin on his face. Turning to the men he bellowed, “bows! And if any of you shoot before his highness gives the order I’ll make you run out and collect your premature release.”

Aziz grimaced at Derek’s insult to the men’s manhood but knew that the men would view it as a hollow threat. Hearing the sergeant major’s words, the men chuckled to themselves but were very careful when they knocked arrows to their bows. Just as the men had finished making ready, a horn sounded and the assembled white ranks of the Muntiari charged forward.

Henry had managed to get some rest but his dreams had been haunted by the visions he had experienced earlier in the night. The prince along with Paul, the squad of soldiers and the twins had woken up early and now that it was well past midmorning, the gargantuan keep had faded into a grey smudge on the horizon behind them. Magda hadn’t mentioned the events of the previous night to Henry or any of the other travellers but the prince did notice that she continually threw him sidelong glances. It was obvious that she felt some manner of concern for prince and it hadn’t gone entirely unnoticed by the rest of the group.

“She seems to like you highness,” Paul said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Don’t be ridiculous major,” Henry snapped.

Paul was fully aware that the prince only exaggerated his diminutive rank when he was stressed or felt that the undertaking was progressing poorly. To diffuse the situation he also emphasised his apology, “terribly sorry highness.”

Henry realised that he had been unnecessarily callous with the loyal Spy Master and said, “no need Paul.” Changing the subject, he added, “are we any closer to discovering who stole the scroll?” Henry knew that Magda was observing him closely and, not that he didn’t trust her, preferred their ultimate objective to remain secret from the smuggler.

“Well,” Paul started, obviously deep in thought. “I’ve narrowed it down to five possible suspects.”

Suddenly interested in the conversation, Henry asked, “and who are they?”

“It had to be a visiting noble. One who had enough influence at court to intimidate Aidan Baines into working for them *and* who had the riches to hire four ships to flee the city. They had Rigarian marines but Tsuki vessels and also

knew that the Tabula was being stored in one of the royal palaces," he surmised.

"So who could it be?" Henry asked.

"It must have been one of the visiting nobles...working on the leather tanning trade consortium," Paul concluded.

Henry thought for a moment, "I don't think it could have been Princess Xanthi, she was far too young. She couldn't have been more than fourteen."

"I wouldn't discount it Henry," Paul said. He used the prince's first name to avoid revealing his true identity to Magda who was within earshot. "She was rather attractive...Aidan has always had an appetite for striking young women."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Henry replied. The existence of the duke's mistress was common knowledge at court, in addition to the various other women he had coupled with.

"So it wouldn't be wise to discount her," Paul deduced. "But I agree that it's unlikely. We also have four other suspects that could have been involved in the theft."

“Prince Yazzi, Captain Kelly and Adalella and Durki.” Henry reeled off the other merchantmen who had bid for the contract.

“Yes,” Paul agreed. “Each one of them had the means and motivation to take the Tabula.”

“But they didn’t all now of its existence,” Henry interjected.

“I’m not entirely certain of that...Captain Kelly and the New Sobriuns definitely did. They have wanted the original for years,” Paul summarised.

“And the others?” Henry asked.

“The Rigarians and the Tsukese both have the financial power to make the proposal seem appealing to Aidan. Hiring several ships wouldn’t be a problem for either of them if their governments were involved,” Paul supplied.

Henry had to agree that Paul’s logic was sound. The New Sobriuns had been their staunch allies for the past fifty years and helped them to keep the Tsuki Empire and the other nations of Sobrius at bay. However, they had always wanted access to the original Tabula, something that his father had refused to allow ever since they had destroyed the cities in Heim.

“Do you really think Captain Kelly could really be involved?” Henry asked.

“If you look at the evidence, it’s rather compelling,” Paul concluded. “He was in the army for years and owns an iron ore mine that produces armour for the New Sobriun mercenaries in Rigar. Not only does this give him financial motive for a war in the region but it also means that he has access to Rigarian soldiers, the likes of which we encountered on that ship,” Paul paused, “He’s also a part of the Elephant Party in New Sobrius, those who tried to quell the Confederacy.”

Henry nodded in approval of the spymaster’s surmise. Henry was more than aware of the two factions that dominated politics in the Republic of New Sobrius: the Elephant Party and the Mustang Party. The Elephant Party were eager to extend the nation’s influence over other areas of the four continents and controlled much of the wealth in the nation. They were particularly keen to firmly establish their presence on the continent of Rigar due to the huge quantities of Manaa found there. When last in power the party had tried its best to establish a colony in the Rigarian Confederacy, one of the few areas of Rigar that weren’t part of the mighty kingdom of Al-Rigar, but had failed miserably. As a result of the Elephant’s failings the Mustang Party, who held the support of the populace but couldn’t compete financially with their opposition, had gained power for the first time in a decade.

“But why would Kelly head for The Great Wall?” Henry asked.

"It's the only logical place. If it was the New Sobriuns and Captain Kelly, it's much easier for him to head north across the Anriac Bay and then be escorted through Al-Rigar by his own mercenaries. It's far less risky than braving the frozen sea at this time of the year and he would be fully aware of the number of pirates and privateers hugging the coast of Malpasse: most of them are ours highness," Aziz answered.

"And how about the others?" Henry asked. "Prince Yazzi for example?"

"We both know the Tsuki and the New Sobriuns are heading for war," Paul said. "It's only a matter of time and the Tsuki may be trying to gain the upper hand in the inevitable conflict."

To call relations between the two nations strained would be a huge understatement; they hated one another. New Sobrius had been the superpower in The Four Continents for the past century but, in recent times, the Tsukese were beginning to dominate financially. They could manufacture essential products such as ships, clothing and food much more quickly and cheaply than any other nation in four continents. Most of the four continent's precious metals and gemstones had found their way to the coffers of the Tsuki noblemen and merchants. The impending war between the two nations would happen in the next few decades and Henry was fully aware that the Kingdom of Rubrumterra stood in the path of either country.

“Yes but why would they strike now?”

“Opportunity,” Paul deduced. “The timing must have been right.”

Henry looked uncertain.

“Yazzi may have finally bullied Aidan into submission, he was in Partallow and he had the necessary ships ready to set sail. Opportunities like that don’t often occur.”

Again Henry had to concede to the overwhelming knowledge of regional political affairs that the spymaster possessed. Henry fully believed that the Tsuki Empire could be behind the theft but he hadn’t been particularly impressed by the young prince. Yazzi seemed more concerned with the distractions offered by the city, such as the gambling halls and the taverns, rather than the negotiations of the trade alliance. However, he knew from past experiences not to underestimate individuals because of their reputations or the behaviour that they displayed in public. It wouldn’t be the first time in history that a carefully crafted persona had been employed to deceive an adversary.

“And the two tribesmen?” Henry asked, referring to Duki and Adalella.

“Internal politics,” Paul responded quickly. “Al-Rigar is a very new country and Sheikh Aziz’s grasp on the throne isn’t as secure as he’d like it to

be. If it wasn't for the New Sobriun mercenaries there, he'd really struggle to keep power."

"And they're form a rival tribe?" Henry guessed.

"Precisely," Paul exclaimed. "They'd happily form an alliance with the Tsukese to undermine the sheikh and gain power for themselves."

"So it could be any of them," Henry declared.

"Yes," Paul answered.

The two continued along the hard paved roadway manipulated from living forest, both pondering the identity of the mysterious thief who had turned Aidan Baines traitor.

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Finally the tall nobleman appeared pleased with Aidan Baines. Their caravan had arrived at Grunzstadt the previous night without incident and they were now trying their best to barter for passage across the border. Aidan knew that the local officials of the border town could easily be bought if the price was right and he was more than aware of his master's excessive wealth. They

would soon cross the boundary to Al-Rigar and, from there; the group would only be a week's ride from The Great Gate.

For the first time in a week, Aidan slept soundly.

The white clad Muntiari charged as one entity towards the hastily structured barricade. Aziz and Adaq were shocked by their absolute ignorance of military tactics and their willingness to sacrifice their lives. As they came within range of bowshot, Aziz dropped his hand.

"Loose arrows," the sergeant major howled.

The first volley of twenty arrows flew across the killing ground and cost the fanatics at least fifteen men. A second and third volley also caused similar fatalities and suddenly, without the loss of one Royal Guardsmen, half of the enemy force was destroyed. For the first time since the Royal Guardsmen had encountered the Muntiari, the enemy faltered in their advance towards the sheikh. Aziz's men loosed another volley of arrows as they hesitated and, under a torrent of barbed arrows, turned and fled in unorganised disarray.

A cheer went up from the guardsmen and the sergeant major said, "well done lads but keep your eyes' peeled. You never know with this lot." The burly man turned to Aziz and asked, "orders?"

“Wait until they’re out of sight,” the sheikh said. “Then we’ll flee for Qahtani.”

“You heard his highness lads,” the sergeant major said. “Wait for these cowards to disappear, and then we’ll do the same.”

Aziz appreciated the aptitude of the acting sergeant major and made a mental note to make his promotion permanent if they survived as far as Qahtani.

“What are we going to do?” Adaq asked Aziz in a hushed tone so the men couldn’t overhear the conversation.

Despite their victory, the two men knew that their position was still desperate. Aziz said, “the men and camels are rested. We should be able to make it to Qahtani in one night.”

“And if the Muntiari have a surprise waiting for us in the city walls?” Adaq asked.

“We flee for the citadel. There’s nothing else we can do,” the sheikh concluded.

The enemy soldiers had disappeared around a corner in the meandering canyon and were now lost from sight. “Mount up,” Derek said calmly, ensuring that his voice didn’t echo down the canyon and carry towards the enemy.

The men ran to their rested mounts, leaving behind their tents and other unnecessary equipment: if they didn’t make it to Qahtani, they would never sleep again. Without appointing a rear sentry, the Royal Guardsmen moved down the canyon at a canter. Aziz knew that their chances of survival were slim, particularly if there was another ambush up ahead.

The groups’ progress was fast and within several hours the canyon emptied out onto a fertile plain; in the centre of which the city of Qahtani rose up above the tallest of trees. By Sobriun standards the plain would still be considered a desert, only a few farmsteads littered the landscape and most of those were attributed to growing dates and other hardy crops that could survive in the harsh environment. But in Rigar it was considered one of the agricultural hubs, a region that produced the majority of the Kingdom’s crops and where a decent livelihood could be made through farming. The Kingdom imported the rest of its provisions from surrounding nations, exchanging invaluable Manaa for nourishment but it was a practice that wasn’t sustainable.

Qahtani was a beautiful city by any standards in The Four Continents and many of the Royal Guardsmen, who had never left Lunan, inhaled sharply as they beheld the city for the first time. Unlike the other cities in Al-Rigar, Qahtani was an ancient metropolis. The four walls that circled the original keep had stood for countless generations and had Manaa built into their very foundations to prevent magical assault. The city itself was haphazardly constructed, the roads were bent in every direction imaginable and buildings had been erected randomly alongside them.

“Do we just race for the outer gate?” Adaq asked.

“Yes,” Aziz responded. “Time is more our enemy than anything else.” The sheikh turned to the officer and said, “we’ll fly our colours too. Hopefully somebody on the wall will be watching.”

“Yes highness.” The officer seemed enthused at the prospect of putting an end to subterfuge as he quickly withdrew the royal colours from his saddlebag and attached them to a flagstaff.

Just as the officer finished the task, the sound of a score of cloven hooves echoed behind them in the canyon, sounding the approach of the fanatics.

“Make haste,” Aziz called as he dug his spurs into the flanks of his camel.

The prince and his followers had made excellent progress along the old path, stopping only to rest their mounts twice. They were now coming towards the end of the roadway and could see their final destination and the Anhohë foothills beyond.

“We’ll be there in less than ten minutes,” Lottë informed the party.

“How do we progress from there?” Henry asked Lottë. The prince had been in deep conversation with Paul for much of the journey. The two had been speculating about who had been responsible for the theft.

“We’ll make our way through one of the passes that isn’t guarded,” Lottë said. “There are plenty but you need to pay the right person.”

Henry was a little put back by the remark but he was more than aware of the corruption of local officials in his own country, let alone those in foreign nations. It was a problem that cost the rulers of every country in The Four Continents dearly; Aidan Baines being a prime example.

“How long will it take?” Henry asked.

“A day or so,” the smuggler replied.

The party continued for a few minutes before passing under an ancient archway and the road petered out into a dirt track. The trail hugged the contours as the group ascended the first foothill, their progress much more slow than it had previously been on the causeway. Eventually the group passed into a small village and made for the local tavern.

“We’ll stay here for the night,” Magda informed Henry. “But there are only two rooms. Most of the men will have to sleep in the common room.”

Henry was a little discomposed at the thought of staying on the straw and sawdust floor of an inn’s tavern; however he was relieved to learn that he would be sharing with Paul whilst the twins would take the other room. Once they had selected their mounts for the following day and dropped off their belongings in their rooms, the twins, Paul and Henry convened in the common room.

“This man,” Paul said as he slapped a rather intoxicated soldier on the back, “will be taking us across the border tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, excellent,” the prince replied. “And what is your name good chap?” he asked.

“You can call me Thomas,” the drunk man snapped. “Nothing more.”

Henry was a little taken aback by the man's vulgar tone of voice and was about to retort when Paul interjected, "Shall we fetch the man a drink Henry?" he asked.

"Yes...I think we better had," Henry said.

"What do you fancy?" Paul asked.

"Stout," the man barked. "And the good local stuff, none of that Tsukese rubbish."

"As you like sir," Paul replied as he dragged Henry to the bar to prevent him from replying in anger.

As the son of the King, nobody had ever spoken to Henry in such an obnoxious and ill-mannered fashion. He had been highly offended by the 'guide' and would have told him entirely how he felt if the spymaster hadn't of intervened.

"Why didn't you let me have a word with that fellow?" Henry snapped at Paul.

"For two reasons Henry," Paul said looking round to ensure that they weren't being observed. "Firstly, here you aren't a prince and you aren't his

highness. You are Henry. A leader of a wandering mercenary band and occasional merchant."

Henry looked a little despondent at being spoken to in such a way but realised that it was for the good of the mission and his own survival.

"Secondly," Paul said, stretching out two fingers from his right palm. "He is one of the few people who can get us across that border tomorrow. If we upset him now, he can make our lives very difficult!"

"Yes I understand," the prince conceded. "It's just that..."

"...that you aren't used to being spoken to in such a way." Paul finished for him.

"Yes," Henry said.

The two bought a round of drinks and went back to the table to join the twins and a near comatose soldier.

"What do we do once we cross the border?" Henry asked the group.

"We'll join up with Thomas' counterpart on the other side," Magda answered. "Then we're on our own on the road to Qahtani before heading north to The Great Wall."

“We’ll have to pay another ‘fee’ to him I imagine?” Henry said, referring to the Rigarian border guard on the other side.

“Yes silly,” Magda replied. “But the Rigarians are much more easily bought than those in Heim.”

“So it’ll cost less,” Henry deduced.

“Yes genius,” Magda replied sarcastically.

The group of four continued to chat about inconsequential topics until the tavern closed for the night’s business. Henry was less than impressed with their supposed guide; the man had passed out at the table, knocking the tankard of Stout over himself that the prince had been forced to buy.

Aziz, Adaq, Shahad and the surviving Royal Guardsmen dashed across the farmland towards the gates of Qahtani. Their mounts were fresher than those of the pursuing Muntiari but they were outnumbered by nearly five-to-one. The sheikh knew that their position was precarious but he was positive that he had seen movement atop one of the city’s ramparts as they had moved closer to the keep.

The Muntiari seemed to be closing on them and Aziz was getting a little anxious. The sheikh dared not to glance backwards but his worst fears were confirmed when he saw the sole surviving officer fall from his mount, an arrow had taken him from his saddle. As the arrows became thicker in the air above him, Aziz saw the city gates open and a full two score of soldiers mounted on horseback spill out. To his dismay, they were clad in the white of the Muntiari. He felt demoralised by the development but compelled to continue forwards and deny his pursuers their prize.

Something was different about the Muntiari to the front though and the sheikh felt an odd sense of recognition about the party's leader. And then he realised. The Personal Guard of his younger brother bore white tabards to demonstrate their piety and Alfuhalli's denunciation of his claim on the throne. With new found vigour he urged his mount forward towards the safety of his brother's castle and the men at his command.

Abruptly the shower of arrows from the rear came to a halt and Aziz risked a glance backwards to check on the pursuers. To his surprise, he saw that the Muntiari were retreating in the face of Alfuhalli's Personal Guard. Seeing no reason to further punish his camel, Aziz and the rest of his party slowed their beasts to a walk and approached Alfuhalli, or Alfie as he was known to close friends and family.

“Hi brother,” Alfie called as the sheikh approached him. “Oh, and you brought Adaq with you.”

“Hello brother,” Aziz replied. “Yes, he insisted on coming.”

Adaq tried his best not to look put out by the comment and shifted his attention to the retreating Muntiari who were being pursued by Alfie’s Personal Guard. Their pennants, bearing the royal ensign, snapped in the wind on the end of their long lances.

“They’ll catch them soon enough,” Alfie informed Adaq. “My men ride the best horses in all of Rigar and they are fresh. Your foes look a little tired?”

Seeing that Alfie wouldn’t be entirely satisfied until he knew a little of their story, Aziz gave him a small insight.

“We were ambushed in the desert by two groups,” he said. “They are Muntiari.”

Adaq’s eyes went wide with the revelation and he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Nothing that we can prove,” Adaq answered. “But I’m fairly positive.”

Alfie seemed visibly shaken by the news. Of all of his brothers he was the most devout and had formed close relationships with many of the leaders

within the Muntiari. He was also one of the reasons that the Muntiari hadn't openly declared war on the royal family and Aziz often relied on his diplomatic skills and rapport with the fanatics to quell their lust for fundamentalism. Alfie didn't only wear white to display his piety, but also to indicate his unwillingness to challenge for the crown: something the Muntiari would support.

"This is grave news brother," Alfie said. "We will need to talk on it further in private. How many of your escort were lost?" he asked.

"I left Lunan with only a hundred guardsmen." The sheikh enlightened his brother. "We lost a lot of men on our way here," he added solemnly.

Alfie's eyebrows rose when he learnt the party's original number. An intelligent man, Alfie knew that the sheikh would only leave the safety of the capital city with such a miniscule number of guards if he needed to travel quickly and covertly.

"Should we make for the privacy of my keep?" Alfie suggested.

"Yes that would be ideal," Aziz declared.

The party began to turn towards the safety of the walls of Qahtani when a cry went up from one of the guardsmen to the rear.

“What is it?” Alfie asked eager to return to the keep and discover why his brother was travelling so poorly guarded.

One of his Personal Guard rode up next to him and whispered, “They travel with a woman.”

As a symbol of religious devotion within the monarchy, Alfie was often addressed with such predicaments. “Is she not the wives of one of the men?” he asked.

“No my brother,” Aziz replied. “She is Shahad of the Alnaizi Oasis, and her expertise was required to navigate the plains of Alnaizi and the canyon beyond.”

Adaq, Aziz and Shahad all knew the claim to be false. The party were more than able to navigate their way to Qahtani but the excuse was reason enough for the group to be accompanied by an unmarried woman, especially as she was a woman of rank and importance. The man who had delivered the message didn’t seem entirely satisfied with the excuse and neither did Alfie, but the sheikh’s youngest brother allowed the issue to drop for the moment.

As the men made their way towards the safety of the keep in the centre of Qahtani, on the plains behind them Alfuhalli’s Personal Guard closed in on their prey.

Henry and his party had woken early and, accompanied by a very hungover ‘guide’, made their way to the disputed border between Heim and Al-Rigar. Both of the twins and Paul seemed a little on edge, turning at every sound emanating from the undergrowth and their hands never straying far from the hilts of their swords. They were in stark contrast to Henry’s men who knew nothing of the region and were quite at ease in travelling towards the border.

“Why is everybody so edgy?” Henry asked Lottë. “We have Thomas with us, we should be fine.”

“The border marches are a no-man’s land. Everywhere are bandits, mercenaries who change sides every year, deserters and local rulers who answer to no one,” she said grimly. “Every year a few local *lords* will declare a territory his own. Then, it is up to one side to dig him out of his fortified position and pray that the other side doesn’t attack them just as they have managed to rout the rebels.”

“What usually happens?” Henry asked.

“We used to hang them. But in recent years it has become easier to acknowledge their claim, have them swear fealty to the Supreme Governor in

Groβstadt, give them a minor title and then use their army against the Rigarians."

Henry seemed a little shocked at the state of affairs along the disputed border, and asked, "Isn't that a little conducive to treason?"

"It's the way things are," Lottë concluded. "The Republic was losing until it adopted this policy. Now there is a buffer zone between the Rigarian forces and the Republic's army. It's not ideal, and most of the *lords* are little more than bandits who have scared a lot of men into line, but it does work. The only problem is if you are caught on their lands without a suitably sized escort then you usually become enslaved."

The colour drained from Henry's face as he said, "And do we have a plan to combat such a scenario?"

Magda who almost never left her sister's side laughed. "Of course we do silly," she said. "Look up ahead."

Henry looked ahead and saw fifty or so men on horseback. He was a little afraid of the men and his hand shot to the hilt of his sword.

"What are you doing?" Magda snapped at him.

"They look like vagabonds!" Henry replied impulsively.

Magda had to concede that Henry's appraisal of the men was correct. They rode on tired, shabby looking mounts of an inferior breeding that could barely carry their weight. Though they would have been useless in a cavalry charge on the plains to the south-east, they were suitable for travelling around the rocky mountains and foothills of western Heim. The men wore no real uniform, only black tabards covered with grey surcoats and black trousers, accompanied by a small armband that bore the Republic's coat of arms; the only item that identified them as soldiers of Heim. The men also possessed varying lengths of beards, a breach of discipline punishable by death in the Rubrumterran Royal Army.

"Morning sergeant," the leader of the brigands-turned-soldier said to Thomas.

"Morning, my lord," Thomas replied, "Any trouble?"

"No sergeant, everything's in order." Seeing the two women accompanying them, the leader's attitude lightened. "Hello my lovely ladies," he quipped. "And what are my best customers doing in such paltry company?" he said, indicating Henry and the sailors.

Henry was about to object when he realised the man had a point. After a sea battle, a night in a brothel and several days spent on the road without

bathing, his men looked very much the part of dangerous criminals or mercenaries. Their clothing reeked of sweat and their faces were smeared with grime from days of travel and time spent at sea. In addition to this, they had swapped their military issue tunics for civilian clothing in Groβstadt, giving them the appearance of thugs for hire. Henry realised that he was the only member of his party who had undertaken Madame Troisieme's offer of a bath.

Magda responded to the men's jest, "They are ours, on their way to Qahtani."

Henry felt a surge of jealousy rise up in his chest as Magda fell in next to the leader of the brigands. This feeling was redoubled when the brigand made Magda laugh, her voice carrying to him in his position near to the rear of the group.

The large party made good progress as the day wore on but it was suddenly halted when the landscape fell quiet.

"Halt," the leader of the brigands called out.

The landscape had changed as they had travelled further northwards and gained elevation. The thick, unkempt forest that made up so much of the Republic's countryside had been replaced by a rocky scene, occasionally interrupted by a withered tree and intermittent shrubbery. Despite the

change, there was still ample wildlife; mostly birds and mice but Henry had also spied the occasional herd of deer. However, emerging from behind a turn in the road, the animals fell silent.

“What is it?” Thomas whispered to Henry.

“I have no idea,” the prince replied. “Aren’t you supposed to be the guide?”

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked.

The man took offence at the prince’s sarcasm and was just about to work himself into a frenzy when the atmosphere changed. From either side of the dirt road men appeared with bows pointed menacingly at the leader of the brigands.

The leader of the brigands said something in Rigarian to the man who lowered his bow. The archer said something back to the leader and the two began to laugh. As the couple enjoyed the joke, a third Rigarian materialised and approached the pair. By the expensive boots that he wore and the superior clothing that adorned his muscular frame, it was obvious that this man was the leader of the archers.

As the two leaders spoke to one another, Magda rode down the line to where Henry and Thomas were waiting on their mounts. “You’re needed,” she said to Thomas.

The corrupt soldier made his way to the front of the line, leaving Magda and Henry alone to talk.

“What’s happening?” the prince asked.

“They’re Rigarian scouts,” she replied. “The main force is kept in Zanad and these men merely patrol the border. Should they spy an invading force, they simply send for the core body of the army. It’s a system that works for them and has kept the foothills peaceful for the past generation or so. The main fighting happens down on the Flachland Plains where it’s easier for armies to manoeuvre.”

“I see,” Henry said. “So will these be the men to take us to Qahtani?”

“Yes,” she replied mildly. “They’ll escort you through the desert to the city and avoid the officials at Zanad.”

Henry noticed that she had used *you* instead of *we* and asked, “Won’t you be joining us in Rigar?”

“I’m afraid not. I have duties to see to with my people.” Seeing that Henry looked a little upset at the prospect of continuing without her, she joked, “Will you miss me?”

Not accustomed to such banter, but realising that the striking woman wasn’t aware of his royal position, Henry simply retorted, “Of course I will.” Being sure to emphasise the sarcasm, he added, “Terribly so.”

Magda didn’t seem too put aback by his response and leant over and kissed him on the cheek. “You had better come back to me silly.”

Henry opened his mouth to say something back but, for one of the few times in his life, felt lost for words. He simply responded by saying, “I’ll give it a go.”

Magda flashed him a smile before turning her mount and riding toward the rear of the line. There she waited for the brigands to escort her back to the village that they had stayed in for the previous night. Trying not to dwell on the odd sensation that he was experiencing, the prince rode to the front of the line and joined the exchange between Paul, Thomas the leader of the brigands and the leader of the Rigarians.

Without even introducing himself, the leader of the brigands said to Henry, “You must pay him now before you continue. He wants ten gold sovereigns here and twenty more once you reach Qahtani.”

Henry was a little taken aback by the man’s rudeness but he simply said, “That can be arranged.”

Henry nodded to Paul who took out a small purse of gold coins, counted out ten sovereigns and passed them over to the Rigarian. The man smiled and bit into one of the coins to test their authenticity. Satisfied, the man said something to Paul in a language that Henry didn’t speak and nodded up and down at him.

Paul translated for the prince. “He says they’re the best quality gold coins he’s ever come across. As you paid him so handsomely, he won’t once consider selling you into slavery should the opportunity occur.”

Henry was a little taken aback by the man’s honesty and the prospect of slavery had the coins not been up to the man’s standards. “Tell him thank you,” the prince said. “And could I ask you...what language is he speaking?”

Paul thanked the grateful man before answering Henry’s question. “It’s an old form of Rigarian,” he informed the prince. “Most of the men along the border were taken as children from their families in the tribal lands. In the far

reaches of Al-Rigar they still speak the ancient language as it is considered more pious than the equivalent spoken by traders and city dwellers.”

The man smiled at Henry again and indicated that he should follow behind him. The time for the party to divide was growing closer and Henry was a little moved when he saw Magda, Lottë and Paul embrace one another before they departed.

The group, its numbers now diminished by the departure of the brigands and Magda, made their way into the wastelands of the Rigarian desert.

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Aziz and Adaq joined Alfie in his private counsel room. The room was bland in comparison to Shahad’s magnificent citadel or even the sheikh’s modestly decorated palace in Lunan. Only one large tapestry hung on the wall; a map of the local region embroidered into the stitching. Other than this one luxury that the young royal afforded himself, the rest of the chamber lay bare apart from several inexpensive divans and small tables for members of the court to feast at. The three now occupied one of the divans as they tucked into

a spread of roast mutton and rice on the platter in front of them. Adaq had just finished reciting the series of events that had preceded their arrival to Qahtani.

“That really is remarkable,” Alfie said. “I had no idea that the Muntiari had become so…bold...and that the Tabula had been found.”

“I’m afraid both are true,” Aziz responded. “Did your men manage to catch the Muntiari?”

“Yes and they wiped them out,” the younger royal replied. “They seemed rather eager to die.”

Aziz had expected as much. The Muntiari weren’t notorious for their desire to stay alive; they seemed more than happy to die in the line of duty. However, the group who had pursued them on the plains outside of the city had held self-preservation in higher regard than previous groups.

“I’d have preferred if they could have got a prisoner,” the sheikh stated.

“Yes, it’s a pity that they couldn’t, but they threw themselves on their swords when they realised they were outnumbered.”

Adaq nodded, taking in the information. He had never entirely trusted the sheikh’s younger brother, he enjoyed too much support from the fanatical Muntiari and other more pious and extreme sects of the populace. They may

only be a small majority of the population, but they were growing in influence and financial clout. The advisor had an extensive spy network in place at the palace in Qahtani, one that he would be consulting with once he found the opportunity.

The nobleman was ecstatic. He had come to terms with several of the more complex spells contained within the Tabula and now felt secure in the luxurious villa that he rented in the city of Qahtani. He also thought that Aidan Baines had suffered enough at his hands to make amends for his mistake. The traitorous Rubrumterran noble would be rewarded richly for his services, he might even be lucky enough to gain the governorship of his old Kingdom.

The old scholar had revisited the battlements daily at the bequest of his master. At first he had been apprehensive; his superior hadn't been overly pleased to learn of the servant's failings at sea, but had been encouraged by his progress since. Now that the Tabula was only a week's ride away in the city of Qahtani, he knew that his master would be pleased.

Henry and the rest of his party had quickly crossed the border and made their way towards the significant city of Qahtani. When he had first lain eyes on the place, Henry had had to admit that the municipality was impressive.

Henry, Lottë and Paul had spoken at length as how to proceed from this point and, finally, they had all agreed on a plan devised by Paul. They would change back into their royal tabards and try their best to look as respectable as possible whilst flying the prince's colours. Paul assumed that the governor of the city, somebody who he knew personally following an assignment in the metropolis, would ride out to receive him, giving him the opportunity to negotiate with Alfuhalli. They had agreed not to mention the Tabula to the governor but to claim that they were chasing Aidan Baines, a defector from their court, and a political spy, whose identity they didn't know.

Henry and Paul both considered the plan risky but had decided to travel in Al-Rigar as an unidentified Sobriun would be riskier. Non Nasir worshippers weren't uncommon in the Kingdom, but small vulnerable groups, such as his own, were often subject to scrutiny and occasional capture for slavery.

The party now stood at the edge of the plain that was overlooked by the ramparts of the old city. They were flying Henry's royal pennant at the tip of one of the spears that Lottë had brought along should the need arise.

The three men felt the entire keep rumble before they heard the horn sound. Qahtani's original purpose was to serve as the gateway to the rest of Rigar from the continents of Sobrius and Tsuki. However, in recent times the Rigarians had pushed back Heim and reclaimed much of their historical desert lands to the east. Despite this, Qahtani remained an important city and the ancient warning horn, which was over thirty feet in length, was still regularly serviced.

"It's very rare to hear the horn sounded twice in one day," Alfie said.

"What could it signal?" asked Adaq.

"Many things," the young royal replied. "An approaching hoard, a foreign dignitary, the return of our Muntiari friends..."

Alfie was interrupted by the entrance of one of his white clad guardsmen who ran up to the three men and bowed, waiting for permission to speak.

"What is it captain?" Alfie asked the officer of middling years.

"Caliph," the man started breathlessly, "it's the Rubrumterrans: an envoy from the Rubrumterrans."

All three men looked a little shocked at the news. Relationships with the Rubrumterrans were very good; there was stable trade between the two nations and, since their withdrawal from northern Rigar, the two had not clashed in battle.

“Send him in,” Alfie said.

“Your grace,” the officer continued, “there’s more. The party is waiting on the plains outside the city and they fly the royal banner...it’s Prince Henry’s.”

At this news all three men stood up in shock.

“What can this mean?” Aziz asked.

“I don’t know but I guess he may be in Qahtani for the same reason that we are,” Adaq said to Aziz.

The three men quickly made their way out of the young royal’s private quarters and into the quad where Alfie’s personal guard had already assembled and mounted in anticipation of their leader’s arrival.

“Where are they captain?” he asked the officer who had reported the event to him.

“Away to the east your grace, only a five minute ride away,” he answered dutifully.

The three men mounted up and made their way through the crowds of the city and the four concentric city walls that protected the keep and it’s populace from invaders. The sheikh, Alfie and Adaq were followed by two score of the younger royal’s personal guard and the remaining men of Aziz’s Royal Guard.

Henry watched as the gates of the city were flung open and well over two hundred mounted men cantered in his direction. They had unfurled their colours, showing two royal banners and one that belonged to a minor house which the prince was unfamiliar with.

“This could be interesting,” Paul said. He too had noticed the banners.

“Yes,” Henry concurred. “If they don’t capture me for ransom that is.”

The possibility had occurred to the pair that the leader of Qahtani may try to turn the situation to his financial gain. It wasn’t uncommon for a noble to be a captured and then for the captor to demand a fee from the noble’s father or their family as a whole. This practise was widespread throughout The Four Continents, though it was frowned upon to detain members of other nation’s

royal families. This practice often led to war and most nobles were eager to be rid of royals from other countries as quickly as they could. In addition to this, Paul had worked in Qahtani before and claimed that Alfuhalli was a reasonable man.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Paul said. His eyes were transfixed on the banners of the approaching horsemen, “it can’t be,” he whispered to himself.

Overhearing the spy, Henry asked, “What is it?”

“The pennants. One belongs to Alfuhalli, the governor of Qahtani and the younger brother of the sheikh. The other is a royal one too...it belongs to Sheikh Aziz.” Henry seemed astonished by the revelation but Paul continued. “The final one belongs to his first advisor. I suspect he heads the Rigarian Intelligence Corps: he’s my opposite number.”

Henry didn’t understand the full implications of what Paul had just divulged. The existence of the Rigarian Intelligence Corps was undeniable; all of the nations of the four continents had their own spies and informants. The Rigarians weren’t particularly noted for their military prowess, or the capability of their secret service. The new Kingdom relied more on the abilities of the New Sobriuns than their own fragmented network of tribal espionage.

The sheikh's escort came to a halt about a hundred yards form the prince and his party. Accompanied by his younger brother and his advisor, the sheikh continued to ride forward slowly. Interpreting it as a signal for him to do likewise, Henry rode to meet Aziz flanked by Lottë and Paul. The prince had completely missed the female smuggler's transition from a woman of the Republic to that of a desert traveller. She now wore a black veil that covered her entire body and face, leaving only her eyes visible to all outward appearances. Henry was sure that she kept her weapons secreted about her person, though they were completely hidden from view.

"Greetings highness," Aziz said to the prince in Rubrumterran.

"Greetings sheikh," Henry responded in Rigarian.

Henry felt tense. He had met the sheikh at several peace details, acting as an intermediary between the Republic and Al-Rigar, but didn't know the man well. He was deep in Rigarian territory, had arrived unannounced and only possessed a paltry escort. The sheikh, on the other hand, was a five minute ride from the second largest city in *his* Kingdom, had over two hundred men at his back and didn't require an announcement.

"It's always a joy to see you old friend," Aziz continued the pleasantries in Rubrumterran. "But it isn't exactly what I was expecting."

Henry laughed. He knew that they couldn't speak about imperative matters in the open fields, surrounded by several hundred men. "Yes, it is a matter of importance that brings us this way. We were seeking your help, should you be willing to assist."

Aziz's suspicions were confirmed. Henry had been sent to retrieve the Tabula from the thief who had stolen it from the island capital. He was slightly confused however; Adaq and Aziz had both presumed that the thief would have been travelling by sea. Their plan had been to cut them off before they could reach The Great Gate; the only thoroughfare that dissected The Great Wall.

"I'm sure we can accommodate," Aziz replied mildly. "I imagine the city would be happy to receive such an illustrious guest."

"We are pressed by matters of state but would be happy to enjoy your hospitality for the night," Henry retorted.

"Excellent," the sheikh replied. "But the roads outside of Qahtani are dangerous beyond imagining for one who is more accustomed to the safety of Rubrumterra. Perhaps I could offer an escort?"

This confirmed Henry's suspicions. The sheikh was on the same quest as the prince was and would be trying to divulge information from him. He had no

objection to the sheikh's aid in finding the Tabula and the mysterious thief but didn't want the Tabula falling into the hands of any other nation. The Rubrumterrans had been so awestruck by the knowledge contained within the scroll that they had refused to wield it. He was confident that Aziz was a dependable leader but he couldn't account for his successors, or if the fanatical Muntiari would claim it for their own. There was much for him to consider.

Led by the pair of royals, the two groups mingled as they made their way back to the city of Qahtani.

Aidan Baines had heard the alarm horn and dispatched one of the mercenaries hired in Heim to investigate its cause. He was a little apprehensive about the entire scenario, particularly since the sheikh and the head of his intelligence corps had arrived in the city. His master had dismissed their arrival as a coincidence, but Aidan was convinced that there was more to the arrival than met the eye. Also, the sheikh's arrival had resulted in Alfuhalli's personal guard flooding the streets to maintain order during Sheikh Aziz's visit. The guardsmen were continually stopping and questioning anybody that they didn't recognise in the city and foreigners came under particular scrutiny.

Abruptly, one of the mercenary guards posted to watch the front of the villa informed Aidan that somebody was approaching the luxurious dwelling. “Who is it?” he demanded.

The mercenary lowered his bow and said, “It’s Bastian. The man you sent out.”

Aidan was pleased that the man had returned so promptly after he had been given the task. He had been fretting that the man may have cracked under the scrutiny of one of the guards or worse, that he had been followed back to the villa.

“Send him through,” Aidan ordered.

The main gate to the villa was opened to admit the man and was barred once he had gained entry. The sword-for-hire made his way directly to the lavish room that Aidan had commandeered as his own to report to his employer. The man took in the surroundings as he waited to be heard.

The room reeked of the excess and indulgence that was common amongst the Rigarian nobles who had benefitted from the Manaa trade. The floor was solid marble, as were the walls though they were interlaced with gold leafing and the focal point of the ceiling was a grand chandelier made from genuine glass crystal. The furniture was sparse, as was the custom with

all Rigarian dwellings, but it was of expensive cut and made from the finest materials. The mercenary's eyes rested on the lone figure in the room, that of Aidan Baines. The mercenaries respected Aidan more than they would most employers due to his knowledge of military tactics and his natural ability to command. He was taller than most men and his hair had almost given in to the grey that was gradually pushing back the chestnut brown that had once occupied his cranium. The angry welt that the magician had given him had all but disappeared.

"What is it soldier?" Aidan asked the patient mercenary.

"It's a visiting party from Rubrumterra sir," he reported neutrally. "Prince Henry and a small escort."

Aidan did everything he could not to show his dismay at the news but failed miserably.

"Thank you soldier, you may leave," Aidan ordered..

Only his master and himself knew of their true goal and what they had hidden in the villa. The mercenaries weren't even aware that they were being pursued by the prince; he had simply informed them that they were two minor noblemen out of Partallow who needed protection on the road to Rigar.

After considering his options for a short moment, Aidan decided that it would be best to inform his master of the development. He made his way through the villa to the master bedroom suite, the one his master had taken for his own. They had appropriated the property through a broker in the city, the previous owners having been executed for heresy several months earlier. Finally arriving at the nobleman's chambers he knocked twice.

"Yes?" a powerful voice boomed.

Aidan knew the man loathed any interruption, but he considered this development worthy of his attention.

"It's me master, may I enter," He paused, "It's urgent."

Aidan was still unsure who it was that he served. The man always wore a hooded robe and had his collar pulled up to cover his mouth and cheeks. The only inclination of his identity were the glowing eyes that shone out intelligently from beneath his hood. Aidan suspected that he was a Rigarian as he had overheard him barking orders in the language whilst they had been in Partallow but, other than this, he had no idea who he was. He had had ample clout in Rubrumterra but employed people from all four continents and was wealthy beyond the old sailor's imagining.

"If you must," he snapped through the door.

Aidan entered cautiously and respectfully, eager to avoid another magical chastisement.

“What is it?” his master demanded aggressively.

There was scribbled on parchment and open scrolls everywhere. The room had been turned into a study and strange looking devices, not known to the old sailor, littered the interior. The nobleman had left behind most of his possessions when they had been forced to abandon ship but, since arriving in Qahtani, had managed to appropriate many of the instruments that had been lost. Considering his substantial wealth, Paul expected that his master would abandon many of the items when they departed the city.

“The prince is entering the city,” Aidan informed his master.

“I am fully aware of that!” The tall nobleman growled. Lifting his head so that Aidan could almost make out his features beneath his hood, the nobleman said, “The sheikh arrived in Qahtani several hours ago. Do you really wish to feel my wrath again?”

Aidan was more than intimidated by his master. The man was able to inflict magical wounds on him at a whim; he had already proven his ability to do this once and Aidan was eager to avoid a recurrence of the incident.

Realising that the tall figure had misinterpreted his meaning, Aidan said, “It isn’t Aziz...its Prince Henry...from Rubrumterra.”

The nobleman seemed fazed by this at first, but after a moment the cunning intelligence returned to his eyes and his cheeks regained their colour. “He knows we’re here,” he concluded. “But he doesn’t know where. We’ll be fine.”

“He’s accompanied by Paul Ajalasi and Lottë of the Guild. They are fairly powerful allies.”

“So?” the powerful man spoke sarcastically. “They are nothing.”

Aidan was a little worried by his master’s laissez faire attitude. Though he considered his master’s might and wealth to be great, he didn’t underestimate the reach of the Rubrumterran royal family. “But sir...”

Aidan’s protestations were cut short by a back-handed slap that the nobleman threw across the traitor’s visage. “Leave here now!” the nobleman shouted.

Aidan left the man’s quarters feeling a little distressed by the entire situation. He was fully aware that his master was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in four continents and that he had also added the knowledge of the Tabula to his arsenal. However, he had not fully grasped the

information that was contained within the scroll, nor was he able to exercise the full potential of his wealth and influence whilst they were trapped in the Rigarian city. Aidan felt helpless..

“So how do we progress from here?” Aziz put the question forward to the group.

Prince Henry had endured the formal reception that had been quickly organised in his honour with the good grace that was expected of his station. Many splendid members of Alfuhalli’s court had presented ostentatious gifts to the Rubrumterran prince, which he had accepted with dignity and courtly smiles. However, with the pleasantries completed and the entire visiting party weary of the farce, the two royals decided that it was time to initiate proceedings privately.

“Well, I think we both know why we’re here,” Paul said. He was unwilling to disclose any information to the foreign monarch and his advisors, despite suspecting that they were now their allies.

“And why would that be?” Adaq asked.

The reason for them being there was clear to all of the parties involved: the problem was that neither side wanted to divulge the truth first.

“We are here on matters of state importance,” Paul avoided the question. “And to enhance relations with our good neighbours; the Kingdom of Al-Rigar.”

“And Al-Rigar welcomes our old friends from Rubrumterra with open arms. Yet we can’t help but wonder what these matters of state importance are...” Adaq left the thought unfinished.

Paul was about to retort when he was interrupted by Henry. “Enough,” the prince said.

Henry knew that the two intellectual men were more than able of exchanging repartees all day without any progress being made. He was also aware that the thief was gaining precious time as they deliberated and avoided the dilemma.

“Tabula,” Henry said simply.

The prince wasn’t unfamiliar with negotiations and, since his father had fallen ill, it had become a position that he was finding himself allotted to more and more often. Though he had ‘put all of his cards on the table’, he had done so in a way that allowed him to judge the Rigarian’s reaction to the news.

Aziz was also well rehearsed in matters of negotiation and wasn’t overly fazed by Henry’s admission. However, he hadn’t been expecting the prince to

be so forthcoming with his information and his head immediately shot in the direction of his advisor before his gaze came to rest on the Rubrumterran royal again. “Yes...” he prompted.

From the sheikh’s reaction, Henry felt certain that Aziz’s purpose for visiting Qahtani was the same as his. “May we speak frankly?” Henry asked the sheikh.

“Of course,” Aziz replied. The Rigarian leader was still being cautious, but he was positive that they were both trying their best to prevent the vital document from falling into the wrong hands. He was also aware that the prince would be fearful of an attempt by the Rigarians to seize the Tabula and utilise the information contained within. Having heard of the atrocities committed by the New Sobriuns in Heim; Sheikh Aziz had no intention of exercising the knowledge contained in the Tabula. He believed that it should be protected much more carefully than it had previously been and that the Rigarians should be involved in the security. “I believe that we are both speaking of the ancient Tabula that was stolen from your capital city several days ago. But I am a little confused. I expected the Tabula to be taken by sea to The Great Gate. That you are here on foot would suggest otherwise...”

Henry felt that the sheikh was telling the truth. The man was willing to aid them in their quest but only to a point. The Rubrumterran prince suspected

that once the Tabula was recovered, he would face a battle to retain possession of the vital document. Realising that the prospect of the Tabula being divided between the Rigarian royal family and his own regal relations was a much better alternative than it falling into the possession of extremists or one of the superpowers in the region, Henry began to recount the events of the previous few days.

All of those assembled; Paul, Lottë, Adaq, Alfuhalli and the sheikh listened intently to Henry's narrative. Though Paul had been present for much of the events that had transpired, he still listened attentively to the account.

The recount had lasted for almost an hour when Adaq interrupted the prince. "You say a tall nobleman? Hooded with unidentifiable features? Accompanied by a Rubrumterran naval officer? And they were travelling in a caravan out of Heim?"

"Yes," Henry ignored the interruption.

Adaq leant over and whispered in Aziz's ear for a few moments. The sheikh nodded and announced to the group that, "Such a party is currently here in the city."

Paul and Alfuhalli both gave Adaq their full attention, yet Alfuhalli spoke first.

“How do you know this in my city?” he asked harshly.

Adaq not only dealt with matters of trade and negotiation, but was also charged with gaining intelligence on the sheikh’s behalf. Many Rigarian nobles didn’t like to think they were being spied on and Alfuhalli was no exception to this rule.

“A man in a tavern told me last night,” Adaq replied. In reality, it probably had transpired this way, though Alfuhalli would be eager to find the sources of Adaq’s information and whether or not he had sources hidden within Qahtani’s inner-court. “But with the greatest of respect Caliph, we have much more pressing issues than how I know this.” What the advisor said verged on insulting the sheikh’s brother. Had he not been first advisor to the sheikh and the issue being urgent in nature, he may have suffered reprisals.

Seeing that this was detrimental to their cause Paul injected. “Could we get them? Here in the city?”

“Yes,” Aziz replied. “But what do we do once the Tabula is recovered?” he asked the others.

Henry knew that this would be an issue but didn’t want his current position to affect the bargaining. “We put the Tabula on one of the Favanas, one of the smaller islets, declare the island a joint territory between the two of

us and have a joint force of Rigarians and Rubrumterrans to guard the document secretly. It'll be magically guarded too by men from either nation."

Aziz considered the arrangement momentarily before saying, "We would require a dozen new ships for our fleet in the Anriac Bay...to help guard the Tabula from naval attacks."

Henry was sensitive to the Rigarian's naval inferiority in the Anriac Bay and how they would feel inadequate if the Tabula's security depended on maritime forces. "We will build you the ships sheikh, but only if you provide us with Manna to recompense the labour and materials."

Aziz had expected such a rejoinder and responded, "Done. But we'll have to look into the specifics of the deal later."

Henry realised he had just brokered the largest arms deal that Rubrumterra had ever entered into. The arrangement would supply thousands of unemployed dockworkers with labour and secure a huge quantity of Manaa for the Kingdom. It would also reinforce their alliance with the Kingdom of Al-Rigar and Rubrumterra would still enjoy naval dominance in the Anriac Bay. "Excellent," Henry responded. "But for slightly more pressing concerns, what do we do now?"

"Seal the city?" Alfuhalli suggested to the group as a whole.

Aidan made his way down the expensively decorated hallway towards his master's suite once more. This news was pressing and it could potentially jeopardise their entire mission. The naval officer knocked tentatively at his master's door.

"What do you want?" the nobleman demanded. "It had better be good this time Aidan," he snapped.

Aidan entered and informed the powerful man of the recent change in events. Again the traitor thought that his master was being a little blasé about the entire affair as the hooded figure chose not to respond, merely waving his hand in a dismissive gesture towards Aidan and the door.

Aidan was about to leave when the tall nobleman inquired, "They have sealed the city entirely?"

"Yes master," Aidan replied. "One of the mercenaries also carries word that some soldiers are massing throughout the city. He expects them to carry out door to door searches shortly...if they don't already know where we are, they will soon."

The distinguished noble inhaled slowly, resting the tips of his fingers in front of his hooded visage as he considered his options. “Do you think we’re in danger?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Paul answered despite every bone in his body imploring otherwise. “But we will be. It’s not every day that a rich merchant travels into the city and pays in gold for a luxurious villa. It’s even rarer for such a man to employ thirty or so mercenaries from Heim and have them guard his new purchase without so much as leaving the premises once.”

The tall man paused again, as he so often did when making decisions. “We’ll leave at once. But don’t inform the men...they can keep up the pretence of our presence here whilst we escape the city.”

“They may need a little persuasion,” Aidan said. He knew mercenaries better than most, having employed them on behalf of the Rubrumterran Kingdom many times before. He was fully aware of how fickle their loyalty could be, particularly when a better offer emerged or extreme danger was encountered. “A few silver florins each should suffice.”

The nobleman looked unfazed by the increase in price. “Make it so,” he said. “We’ll be travelling within the hour.”

“Yes sir,” replied Aidan.

The traitor made his way back down the corridor and called for the leader of the mercenary company who had proven to be reliable thus far. The man appeared with the remarkable speed of a former military official and the discipline that had been ingrained in him after years serving in the Republic's army. Aidan had been impressed by the former soldier's attitude and the man accepted his new orders without objection. The old seaman was certain that the mercenary company would abandon the villa as soon as he and his master had travelled out of sight; though he was positive that would give the two sufficient time to escape the city.

Aidan had settled the payment and now convened with his master in the nobleman's quarters. The two were ready to flee Qahtani.

Shahad was drenched in sweat. Her 'quarters' were disgusting and she felt thoroughly unwelcome at the citadel in Qahtani. Unlike the other female guests and residents who had been assigned much more luxurious living conditions adorned with expensive silks and large beds, Shahad currently found herself sat on a filthy straw pallet.

"Woman," a female servant called Shahad.

Completely unfamiliar with being addressed in such a manner, Shahad was too shocked to counter the lack of respect. She simply responded by saying, “yes?”

“Your food is ready. You will eat with the other concubines and women of little rank.” The servant walked off without waiting for acknowledgement.

Shahad knew that Alfie was more pious than most members of the royal family but he was being particularly malicious in his treatment of her. Many of the more devout Al-Rigarians and members of the Muntiari considered any woman who travelled with men as women of disrepute; little better than concubines or women who sold themselves for money.

As Shahad got to her feet, she considered the position that she found herself in. She knew that she had to endure the abnormally hovel accommodation that she found herself staying in, yet wondered why Alfie had chosen to treat her so harshly. She would bear the humiliation and torment of being treated like a commoner only because of her love for Aziz and the importance of the mission. However, once her duty was complete, she would have words with the sheikh’s younger brother.

Henry had found the sheikh and his younger brother, Alfuhalli, surprisingly helpful and efficient in the entire process. The city had been sealed swiftly and now, with the permission of Alfuhalli, they hid in an abandoned house not far from where Aidan and the thief had last been sighted. Since changing location, the sheikh, prince and their entourage had learnt that Aidan had purchased a luxury villa in the more expensive part of the city. At present, they had much more accurate intelligence and had also discovered that the pair was accompanied by thirty two of the more nasty mercenaries available for hire in the Republic of Heim.

“I don’t like the idea of this,” Alfuhalli reiterated for the second time.

Henry had been particularly impressed by the ease with which he had been able to enlist the assistance of the Rigarian royals and was a little unnerved by the simplicity with which everything had been achieved. However, for the moment he was content to comply with the ruse; certain in his mind that duplicity wasn’t absent from the sheikh’s trail of thought.

“We’ll be ok here,” Adaq concluded as he watched several of Alfuhalli’s personal guard disappear in the direction of the residence suspected of housing the thief and his accomplices. “They won’t be able to break through this far. Almost two hundred men and a fair few experienced users of Manaa stand in their way.”

“It’s not that,” Alfuhalli interjected. “I worry for my men...and for the safety of those defenceless souls who live nearby.”

Adaq grunted, both in a confirmation and in disgust. As a royal advisor and the closest friend of the reigning sheikh, Adaq enjoyed privileges that many men of his rank could only dream of. However, he had often been reprimanded for his breaches of court protocol and this situation, where he had chosen to mock a royal’s preference for the wealthier members of the Kingdom above the soldiers who he had sent forward to die in battle, was no different to the others. Fortunately Alfuhalli had not fully comprehended that he was being scorned and overlooked Adaq’s guttural sound. However, the exchange had not been unobserved and Paul made a mental note to investigate the relationship further.

Sheikh Aziz brought the awkward silence to an end. “We shall proceed,” he commanded of his younger brother and advisor. “It is the wishes of God who suffers as a result of battle. Only He knows who will live and who will survive but all must be judged by him in the end.”

Several of the nearby men cheered in approval as Aziz finished his rousing, pious speech. Even Alfuhalli seemed moved by the dialogue and set about organising his men for the forthcoming assault on the villa occupied by the mysterious thief and the Rubrumterran traitor.

“Enemy front,” one of the mercenaries detailed to guard the entrance to the villa called out.

Immediately the mercenaries stopped what they were doing and convened at the front of the premises. The leader of the band ordered the majority of the ex-soldiers onto the wall that surrounded the property whilst the rest secured key positions throughout the grounds. The building had been chosen by Aidan because of the high surrounding wall and the rampart that circled the entire abode; lending the luxurious dwelling the capability to act as a fortress as well as a home.

“State your business,” the guard demanded of the approaching force.

“We are Qahtani’s own regiment, The Personal Guard of his Royal Highness Alfuhalli, brother to the Sheikh of all Rigar.” the leader of the soldiers responded authoritatively.

“Show me your standard,” the mercenary replied. He was an old campaigner and, though he had failed to climb the ranks of the Republic’s Army on account of his class, was more than able to stall for the time that his employer had requested. Besides, he thought to himself, he was in a secure position and the enemy numbered very few. Also, the Rigarians weren’t

particularly well known for their manipulation of Manaa, so he needn't fear for any surprises.

The soldier in the street bellowed a tirade of obscenities that would make all but the hardiest of mercenaries blush, accompanying the insult with a rather rude hand gesture. Following this he shouted, "Open the gate unbeliever."

The old mercenary chuckled to himself. It wasn't the first time that he had witnessed such bravado in a young soldier and the longer he stalled, the more time it gave his comrades to fan out along the top of the wall and knock their arrows. "I may not be Nasir, but I certainly believe!" the mercenary called back.

The soldier in the street placed his shield in front of him, crest distinctly black in the centre of the ivory-white shield. "Here is your standard unbeliever," he spoke through clenched teeth. "And here," he indicated around him with a drawn spear as a hundred similarly clad men materialised out of the surrounding buildings, "is a reason to pay heed to me." The men fell in next to the lone soldier, their combined white shields forming an impenetrable wall.

"What do you want?" the mercenary inquired.

“I *demand* that you open the gate and allow my men to pass into your abode!” came the response. “You shall be allowed to go free; it’s your master we want.”

The old mercenary didn’t believe that for a second. Besides, his men were only outnumbered five-to-one, and he was confident that they could hold the high ground against such odds. The road that led to the property was a natural bottleneck, adorned by other villas on the sides of the long driveway. Only ten men could walk abreast down the boulevard, allowing a few defenders to engage the first rank of attackers with spears and pikes whilst the remainder shot arrows into the mass of bodies below. It was a tactically superior position that would allow the defenders to hold their position but also prevented their escape from the building.

“Put down your weapons and advance one at a time, then we’ll let you pass through the gate,” the old soldier said.

The leader of Alfuhalli’s personal guard turned and whispered something to one of the men in the formation behind him. The message was relayed through the ranks until one of the men at the rear of the squad turned and fled down the road.

“This is your final warning sell-sword,” the soldier reprimanded. “If you don’t yield to us now, we’ll be forced to attack.”

Just as the mercenary was about to retort, he was joined on the rampart by the leader of the mercenary troop. He held out his hand to his men, drawing their attention to his person and said, “An extra gold sovereign per man if we hold this house for another hour.”

The men seemed buoyed by the news of extra booty but their predicament was not lost on all of them. On seeing some of their confused faces, the leader of the mercenaries said, “Once our masters escape we’ll surrender and be escorted back to Heim. These good-for-nothings will be more than happy to accept our surrender to stop the fighting!”

Though many of the men knew that this would have been the case in Sobrius where mercenaries were a too valuable commodity to dispose of, in Rigar there was an abundance of soldiers willing to fight for the highest bidder. However, the men had all been serving under their leader for a long time and trusted him like a father.

“It looks like you’re forced to attack my friends,” the leader of the mercenaries challenged the gathered men beyond the wall.

At that, the men of Alfuhalli's personal guard made their way gradually towards the gates of the villa. As they progressed, they made certain to keep their shield wall intact and their formation tight.

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A flustered looking soldier in the white of Alfuhalli's personal guard entered the derelict house and waited to be seen despite the urgency of the situation.

Alfie, impressed by the man's discipline, gave him permission to speak. "The enemy are refusing to give up the position," he reported. "Around twenty five men have taken up position on the wall surrounding the building. They are well armed and disciplined and..."

"Was there any sign of Manaa or their master?" Henry interjected eager to find Aidan and the thief.

"No...sir," the man responded. He was clearly unsure how he should address the foreign royal. "Neither of the prime targets were visible," he concluded. Turning back to Adaq, Alfie and the sheikh, he continued with his military narrative of the situation. "The squad detailed to take the villa will struggle to achieve their goal. We don't know how many more of them are inside the house and they have enough on the ramparts to hold us at the wall.

In addition to this we know that they have at least one able Manna user within the villa as we couldn't scry on them prior to the attack. Somebody blocked us."

"That confirms the presence of your mysterious thief," Aziz said to Henry.

"Yes," Henry acknowledged grimly. Turning to Paul he asked, "Do you think you'll be able to handle him?"

"I should be..." Paul said, seemingly in reluctance. "But I won't be able to attack him. He's far too advanced. I'll be able to defend myself and most of our men though."

"Most?" Alfie inquired.

"Yes..." Paul replied sombrely. "But not all of them."

Alfie's face drained of colour. He was not well known for his bravery, nor his competence, but kept the population in check through overzealous acts of religious piety. He had never been involved in battle and had always kept his distance during skirmishes with rebels. He was the perfect governor of a quiet province; content to retire to his spiritual studies and allow others to see to matters of political and military intrigue. "What will we do?" the pious man shrieked.

All of the heads in the room turned to the sheikh. “We will attack in force and some men will die,” he said. There were too many people present in the room to reveal the presence of the Tabula but he did add, “There is too much at stake.”

Alfie spoke in a slightly higher voice than usual, “But surely we aren’t expected to fight?” he declared more than asked.

“You won’t be expected to brother,” Aziz informed his younger sibling. “You can stay here with the remainder of your men. Obviously you’ll have a detachment of men allocated to you to protect you from harm!”

Unlike Adaq’s earlier slight, this one didn’t pass unnoticed by Alfie, who blushed and fell silent at being humiliated before the gathered audience.

Taking control of the situation, Sheikh Aziz began issuing orders to his younger brother’s personal guard. The men were a little confused by the change in the chain of command, but military discipline soon took precedence and the men fell about their tasks.

Unseen by anybody else amid the flurry of activity, an embarrassed young royal left the room.

The old soldier wiped the sweat from his brow and narrowly avoided being skewered by a spear as reward for his lapse in concentration. The experienced warrior shifted his weight to his left side as the spear came within inches of the right side of his face; yet only succeeded in piercing the empty space that he had recently vacated. The man from Heim then grabbed the shaft of the spear, completely immobilising the enemy soldier below him and stabbed down with his own weapon, splitting the soldier below in two.

Almost a full third of Alfuhalli's men had fallen to arrows whilst approaching the villa but once the soldiers had reached the wall surrounding the house, the advantage had swung in their favour. The men were locked in a brutal struggle, separated only by the insubstantial barrier that encircled the residence. Men at the bottom thrust upwards with spears and pikes that easily reached the ramparts above. At the same time, the men above released a tirade of stones, arrows and other projectiles on to the heads of the invaders. Some of the defenders also used spears of their own to fend off the invaders at the bottom of the wall. The result of the fighting was a montage of weapons, flesh and blood being blended together by the attacker's booted feet as they jostled for position beneath the blades of the mercenaries above them.

The old soldier looked across at his captain in desperation. "There's no way we can hold them here captain," he said.

The senior officer nodded his head in agreement. “Aye, we’ve fought well. But there are too many of them.” The captain was an experienced soldier, both in the Republic’s army and as the leader of various mercenary bands, and he knew when his forces were beaten. He recognised that if he didn’t yield promptly, his entire force would capitulate; an outcome that would probably cost him and his remaining men their lives. The only reservation with immediate surrender he had was the vile temper of his current employer. The man had insisted that he be given an hour to secure his escape: not that the captain had any idea how he planned to flee. The only path out of the villa was currently blocked by dozens of Qahtani’s soldiers and they weren’t going to let him leave without punishment.

Convinced that he would rather endure the wrath of the city’s guardsmen than the fury of his fleeing employer, the captain took a moment of reprieve and stepped back from the thick of the fighting. Beholding the bedlam before him, he reached into a pouch that drooped from his front belt and grasped inside. Gripping the white linen contained within, he pulled the flag of truce from the pocket and called to his men, “Disengage.” The men stepped back from the desperate fighting and beyond the reach of the enemy weapons, obvious relief flaunted across their faces. The captain stepped forward and unfurled the white fabric that signified their intention to submit.

The relief evident in the mercenaries' expressions was mirrored in the faces of the guardsmen who had been ordered to take the position.

"Disarm," called one of the guardsmen. It was a different soldier to the one who had originally challenged the mercenaries; their leader had obviously died during the fighting.

The men from the republic looked towards their captain who nodded. "Disarm," he said to his men. To the men below he asked, "What are your terms?"

The man was obviously inexperienced with command, much more suited to carrying out his superior's orders but was familiar with the procedure. "Free passage to the city's borders on your immediate surrender," he said.

The experienced officer considered the proposal for a moment with mock deliberation, rubbing his chin with exaggerated deportment. "And a day's grace?" he inquired.

It was custom to give a defeated force a day before they were pursued by a hostile army. Typically, a mercenary force wasn't harried following defeat as they weren't considered a major threat by national rulers, but the armies of foreign powers would be hassled all the way to the country's perimeter and, sometimes, beyond.

“You shall have a day’s grace too,” the acting commander promised. “Now lay down your arms,” he stated more firmly.

Again the men of the mercenary company looked to their leader before they acted, and again the old captain nodded that they should comply with the guardsmen’s demands. A clatter of metal striking stone filled the air as the men dropped their various weapons on the top of the rampart.

“And open the gate,” the white clad soldier said. “You shall be bound and escorted to the edge of the city. There you shall have your weapons returned to you and will be free to make your way to Heim as quickly as your legs can carry you.”

The old captain was familiar with such rigmarole and knew that his services could be employed by the Rigarian soldier if ever he was posted to the border between their two countries. It was not uncommon for mercenaries from the republic to take up employment with Al-Rigar as they often paid more than Heim.”Open the gate,” the leader of the mercenaries commanded to four of his men.

The gate was quickly opened and the exhausted and battered Rigarians spilled into the small garden that garnished the courtyard outside the villa. Alfuhalli’s men were in the process of binding the mercenaries to be escorted

out of the city when several heavily armed men arrived on horseback in the small garden.

The acting commander of the small troop was about to challenge their presence when one of the riders tossed him his reigns and, whilst dismounting from his mount, demanded of the junior officer, “Where are the tall nobleman and the Rubrumterran?”

“Inside your grace,” the soldier responded having realised he was addressing Sheikh Aziz directly. “They weren’t involved in the fighting and we only just managed to make our way in here,” he said indicating the villa.

“Excellent work second lieutenant,” the sheikh praised the young officer. “If any of your men are free, have them form a reserve unit to follow myself and my men in.”

“Yes highness,” the man replied before issuing the orders for the reserve unit to form.

Aziz wasted no time in dismounting his horse and organising the two dozen men, who had accompanied him, into some semblance of order. The sheikh was to lead the party into the property, with Adaq on his left and Prince Henry on his right. Though it was highly irregular for a foreign dignitary of such importance to be accompanying Aziz on a dangerous quest within the limits of

his own kingdom, he found that he had warmed to the company of the Rubrumterran prince and, having heard tales of his exploits, trusted his skills with a blade.

"Everybody," Aziz called, whilst pointing forward. "Follow me!"

The group of around twenty five men charged into the villa, closely followed by a further ten of Alfuhalli's men, who served as the reserve force.

They quickly searched the rooms at the front of the house, finding nothing but empty rooms and the dishevelled bedding that the mercenaries had been using. "The most lavish rooms are usually at the rear of the property," Aziz informed Henry and Paul who weren't overly familiar with the layout of plush Rigarian properties. "That way they don't have to *endure* the noise made by passers-by in the street."

"That's where they'll be," Henry interjected. "Aidan loves the finer things in life."

Adaq and Aziz nodded in unison, confirming that they appreciated the prince's insight.

"I'll take the lead," Aziz said. "As the superior swordsman and the man with the most to lose, it is only right," he cut off the protestations of Adaq and

his men. “The rest of you form a column behind me. Prince Henry,” he started, “If you’d be so kind as to take up position on my flank.”

The prince was a little displeased that the sheikh hadn’t considered his predicament, as a member of the family who’d allowed the Tabula to fall into precarious tenure, as volatile as his own. He was also slightly disgruntled that his skills with the blade had been disregarded without consideration. Aziz had obviously realised his slight, and by asking Henry to take up position on his flank, had diffused the situation before the accidental affront had been registered by the majority of the men present. Henry was pleased by the sheikh’s request and responded in the affirmative, taking up position next to the young ruler at the head of the column.

“On the count of three we charge,” Aziz conveyed to the assembled men at his rear and the Rubrumterran prince to his right. “one...two...”

Aidan had watched from a sheltered position within the villa as the hired soldiers had surrendered to the overwhelming numbers of the city’s guardsmen. He had reported the developments to his master, not that the information had proven to be of much use to his superior. The man, his dark hood concealing his features as it always did, was in some sort of trance. At

first Aidan had assumed that the man was simply ignoring him or was experiencing some form of seizure, but as the time had passed by it had become apparent that he was performing a feat of magic from the ancient Tabula. The traitorous former naval officer wasn't entirely sure how he should interpret this development: on one hand, he had been mistreated by his master and was fully aware that his value to the thief had nearly diminished; on the other, he found himself trusting the mysterious nobleman and wanted to remain a part of his plans in the future. With the enemy soldiers now in the villa itself however, it was time for him to act.

"...three." Aziz let out a war cry and kicked the final remaining door open that led into the luxurious quarters which comprised the rear of the residence.

Henry followed the sheikh into the dimmer lighting of the lavishly decorated room and the pair paused as they were greeted by the unarmed figures of Aidan Baines and a hooded man standing behind a desk littered with scraps of parchment and unfinished scrolls.

"Surrender," Henry demanded of the two men.

Aidan beheld the newly arrived band with surprise, but the hooded figure didn't twitch a muscle: he simply remained rooted to the spot where he stood, seemingly removed from the situation.

"Surrender," Henry demanded once more.

The hooded nobleman gradually moved his head in the direction of the intruders as if he had only just noticed their presence in the room. "No," the powerful man said in defiance. "I would rather flee."

"And how do you hope to achieve that?" Adaq retorted, "Past thirty armed men?"

Henry and Paul were both wary of the thief's abilities after the display that they had witnessed at sea however, despite numerous warnings and several recitations of the tale, Adaq and Aziz couldn't bring themselves to believe the story.

"Like this," the cloaked figure snapped.

A faint light began to emanate from within the cloak that the thief wore. The glow grew stronger in intensity with rapid swiftness, unfathomable for most human minds to construe. The two royals and their retinue who had just burst into the room found their courage falter, unable to intervene with the episode that was unfolding before their very eyes. The radiance expanded, like

the sun breaching the horizon for the first time in dawn, yet, the beam originated from beneath the thief's cloak. Now those within the room had to shield their eyes, desperate to escape the glowing furnace that was replacing the tall nobleman who had once occupied the space before them.

Henry squinted his eyes; partly as a natural response to the phenomenon and partly in fear of the blazing glow that had materialized in the vicinity. He knew that Paul was an able manipulator of Manaa and that there were further magic users loyal to his cause dispersed throughout the area; however, he couldn't help but fear for his life in the face of such a demonstration. To his rear, he realised that Paul was doing his best to counteract the spell but, Henry also realised that he was failing miserably.

"I don't recognise the energy traits," Paul yelled. "I don't even know what he's trying to do."

The light leapt from the thief and now a blinding glow also emanated from the traitor Aidan Baines.

"What's happening?" Henry managed to express to Paul.

But it wasn't the spy who answered the prince's question. A deep voice thundered through the vicinity, declaring, "I'm leaving," to the terrified assembly of men within the room.

The light grew so intense that all of the soldiers, including the two royals, Adaq and Paul, had to shut their eyes for fear of blindness.

And then it was gone.

The light was no more and neither were the two criminals who had once occupied the space before the assembled mass of soldiers and their leaders.

“Where did they go?” a nameless soldier asked.

“Paul?” Henry inquired, deferring to the spy’s superior knowledge of Manaa and its manipulation.

The spy seemed a little disorientated by the experience, yet he was still able to murmur a response. “He transported himself,” he said in awe. “About a day’s ride north of here...he tried to cover his tracks but it must be the first time that he accomplished the spell...still...it’s a real triumph...nobody’s done that for generations.”

The others in the room didn’t require Paul’s narrative to realise the exploit that they had just witnessed. Some manipulators of Manaa were capable of transporting small items such as pebbles or matchsticks within their line of sight but nobody in four continents had transported themselves several miles in generations: it was unheard of.

A temporary silence descended on the inhabitants of the lavish chamber as the soldiers and their leader allowed the incredible feat of magic to register, but it was interrupted by the arrival of a junior ranking officer of the city's guard, "Highness, permission to speak?" the soldier said as he collapsed into a bow.

"Granted," Aziz replied, escaping his state of bewilderment.

"Your brother has arrived," the man paused, "He's executing the prisoners."

Henry, Paul and Adaq were all simultaneously withdrawn from their reverie. The ritual execution of prisoners in The Four Continents was heavily condoned by the peoples who inhabited the region. It was not an uncommon event for the soldiers of other nations to be condemned to a lifetime of hard labour; effectively a death sentence within a decade or so, but simple murder was not overlooked. Retributions by neighbouring rulers were often swift and a leader who executed their captives often found themselves deserted and without an army: nobody wanted to work for the least popular general.

Henry asked of Adaq, "Is this customary in your nation?"

Though he had travelled to Al-Rigar as a youngster, he was not fully accustomed with their ways. He knew that all Rigarians aimed to convert

outsiders to their way of thinking and the church of the Nasir, yet he doubted that any ruler would risk a mutiny amongst their mercenary soldiers.

"No it *is not*," Adaq replied through gritted teeth. Remembering that he was speaking to a foreign dignitary, and a member of the Rubrumterran royal family, he added, "Highness."

"If you'd care to join me highness?" Aziz suggested as he made his way past Henry and the assembled guardsmen behind him, en route to the prisoners in the courtyard.

The party emptied out into the courtyard and found themselves amidst a scene of horror and gore. Most of the mercenaries had been split in two, a means of execution reserved for the most terrible sinners, such as blasphemers and adulterers, within the Kingdom of Al-Rigar. It was by no means any way to treat a man who had given his all for his master in battle and, if such actions were reported to the existing New Sobriun and Republican mercenaries already serving in Al-Rigar, could lead to the downfall of the government.

"What are you doing?" Aziz demanded of his younger brother. "Alfie?" he added the nickname to further patronise his sibling.

“I am seeing that these unbelievers get their reward for treason against the crown and against god,” the younger royal answered in defiance. “I see no reason for their continued existence nor do I see a need,” he continued as he shifted his focus towards Henry and Paul, “To seek aid from other godless beings. We should rid them all from our Kingdom brother.”

The sheikh took several brisk steps, eating up the ground between himself and his younger brother, and delivered a monumental backhanded slap across the young royal’s face. Alfuhalli collapsed to the ground, a mix of blood and spit descending from the corner of his mouth to form a pool in the dirt beneath him. Aziz followed the blow with a heavy boot to the midriff of the already helpless man. From the sheer force of the kick Alfuhalli rolled over several times before coming to rest on his back, his eyes’ staring up into the infinity of the heavens.

“Nobody is above the law!” Aziz dictated to the assembled men. “Only *I* can give orders for the execution of prisoners and only *I* shall! *I* am your god-given ruler and *I* will be obeyed!” The sheikh in all his fury and grandeur was a terrible sight to behold. Nobody present could possibly question who was in command of the situation, nor could they help but feel slightly fearful of the ruler. Aziz, changing his tone entirely as his mind shifted to matters of

business, he inquired of Paul, “Where did the mage and his pet transport themselves to?”

Henry nodded to Paul, confirming that he should share the intelligence with the foreign monarch. “They are about a day’s ride north of the city’s borders...I can’t fathom what direction they’re heading in now but I’m fairly certain they’re heading towards The Great Wall.”

“Why?” Aziz asked, though he had already deduced that The Great Wall was their only logical destination.

“It’s the only place they could head for...if they were Rigarian dissenters they would need the support of the Tsukese, same if they were from New Sobrius and that would only leave a Sobriun thief looking to sell to the highest bidder; the Tsukese.”

As the sheikh paused to absorb the information, Adaq was faster to read between the lines of Paul’s admission. “So you have no idea who stole the Tabula?” he asked. “Only that Aidan Baines was their collaborator.”

“Correct,” Henry conceded. “But we have several suspects, two of whom are your countrymen,” he added, slightly accusatory.

“Highness...” Adaq was fast to cut the conversation short and also to prevent the sheikh from being offended by anything the young prince was

about to say. At this moment in time the two had to remain united. "...Would it be wise to discuss this matter in front of the men?"

Paul instantaneously followed Adaq's train of thought and concurred that it was wise to diffuse any future antagonism before it arose, "No it wouldn't. There are far too many ears present and whilst we procrastinate, the thieves, *whoever they are*, are getting further away."

Aziz was aware that the two Rigarians sent to Rubrumterra to bid for the tanning contract could have been involved in the theft, but it was not an admission that he was willing to make in the presence of his men. Likewise, Henry knew that the Tabula could not have been stolen without the assistance of the Rubrumterran traitor Aidan Baines; something he was reluctant to admit before the assembly of foreign warriors.

Disregarding the odd and potentially hostile atmosphere that had descended, Prince Henry turned his train of thought towards matters at hand. "How do you think we should pursue them?" he inquired of Aziz. The fact that Henry deferred the issue to Aziz proved to the sheikh that the Rubrumterran prince still respected his opinion despite the 'near argument'.

The gesture was not lost on Aziz who made a mental note to thank the prince for diffusing the situation. "We'll move out now, change our mounts at

the palace and then continue north in pursuit.” Aziz was dissatisfied that he had to leave Qahtani so shortly after his confrontation with his younger brother. He knew that he had offended Alfuhalli after dressing him down in front of the assembled ranks of his men and he had hoped to resolve the situation before he left the city. However, the stolen Tabula had to be recovered. Having witnessed the thief transport himself and his accomplice several miles using only the power of his mind and a small deposit of Manaa, Aziz knew that locating the ancient scroll was of paramount importance.

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The old scholar had felt the manipulation before any of his wards had detected the unnatural shift of matter. Though he was hundreds of miles away from the source of the spell, such an extreme act would never escape his attention. He made his way as quickly as possible towards the top of the enormous battlements that he had called home for the past few decades, the muttering under his breath increasing in intensity with every step. *Not as young as I used to be,* he thought to himself as he ascended to the summit of the tower reserved for himself and those of his order.

As he conjured a viewing glass to locate the source of the impressive feat, a vast heap of Manaa crackled and smoked slightly as he drew upon the mineral's supernatural power. The oddly shaped rock, more similar to a coral outcrop in appearance than any other mineral found in the soil, turned from a shocking purple to a dead grey as he employed its power. A large lens appeared before the scholar allowing him to see for thousands of miles in every direction.

From experience and a lifetime of working with the strange purple mineral, the old man was able to locate the individual who had performed the extraordinary act without any difficulty. He quickly focussed the viewing glass on the two men and a smile crept across his lips. He was pleased. Pleased that his student had managed to employ another of the secrets contained within the Tabula and pleased that his apprentice had escaped the pursuing enemies. Looking behind the two lonely figures he realised that they had managed to steal at least a day's march on the sheikh's party, probably a day and a half as the royal party would have to negotiate the traffic of the city. His smile grew as he hurriedly made his way to report the development to his master.

Aidan Baines vomited across the sand, falling face first into the discharge that had only recently escaped his stomach. Completely disorientated and disgusted by the fowl mix of vomit and sand, the traitor's retching redoubled.

"Don't be so pathetic," the hooded thief said despite feeling slightly nauseas himself, "or I'll be forced to leave you here."

"Sorry master," Aidan said as he regained his footing. "But that travel..." he allowed the sentence to go unfinished. He had been caught off guard by the tall nobleman's latest ability, finding the experience utterly intolerable. The former naval officer pulled himself out of the vial mix and, as he spat out the foul concoction, he brought himself uneasily to his feet. He then weakly threw his right leg over the flank of the mule, one of the two they had commandeered from a nearby farmstead, and heaved himself into the saddle. "Will we be travelling by those means again?" he asked of his mysterious employer.

"I certainly hope not," the response came from beneath the draped hood. "I doubt I could repeat the spell so soon after it had drained my mental energy," he continued. Aidan was surprised by his master's admission. Previously he had found his master to be so careful when considering his outward appearance, showing only his strengths and none of his weaknesses.

As if registering his servant's observation, the nobleman added, "But not enough that I couldn't destroy you on a whim."

Aidan knew better than to respond to the threat, he had spent a lifetime being bullied by those more powerful and higher ranking than himself. Instead, he chose to change the topic, "How long to the wall he asked?"

His master usually dismissed such questions as 'idle chatter' but on this occasion he chose to further enlighten the old naval officer. "About a six day ride," he replied.

Aidan was little taken aback by his master's response; he wasn't usually privy to such information. "The prince and the sheikh will try to catch us before we reach the wall," he concluded.

"Let them try," the tall nobleman whispered in defiance.

The two turned their small mules northwards and began their long journey towards The Great Wall and the horrific future that the powerful nobleman had long been planning. The knowledge that his final goal was so close to completion caused the hooded figure to chuckle to himself.

The two royals and their party had made their way quickly through the city to Alfuhalli's palace and now congregated in the courtyard as Sheikh Aziz spoke with an insolent officer who represented the City Watch.

"Stand aside Colonel," Aziz demanded of the high ranking officer adorned in the pious white of Alfuhalli's Personal Guard.

"My oath was sworn to Qahtani and the master of this city highness, not to you," he replied whilst fingering the hilt of his large broadsword.

Aziz had often encountered such problems when dealing with high ranking and officious military bureaucrats from other cities. The soldiers often swore their allegiance to the leader of the city, not to the relatively new royal family who had only recently conquered much of the Rigarian Gulf. Prior to this, the Gulf had consisted of a number of city states who were loyal only to the richest family in the city and their ancient tribal leaders. Much to the sheikh's irritation, the practice had continued during his family's reign and there was no way for him to punish the mutinous soldier as the ritual took place with God as a witness. Any interference by Aziz would be considered as blasphemy. "Where is my brother?" he demanded of the officer.

In a monotonous voice which gave the appearance that the soldier appeared bored with the proceedings he replied, "His grace is sick and bed

ridden. If you would care to wait for a day or two, he would be happy to receive you then."

"My gutless little brother knows, as well as you do, that I have to leave immediately. I only need his men, his mounts and his supplies and I'll be on my way," the sheikh uttered through gritted teeth.

"Sorry highness," the man remained stoic, "but that's utterly impossible. Your brother is a very sick man and he is unable to receive you." As the sheikh was about to unleash a tirade of insults at the impertinent officer, a low ranking soldier, also dressed in the pious white of Alfuhalli's Personal Guard, jogged up to the officer and whispered something into his commanding officer's ear. There was a short pause as the message was delivered and the contents were digested by the bureaucrat before the officer turned to Aziz and said, "You may take whatever supplies that you like as well as an escort of five hundred men plus the compliment of guardsmen that arrived in the city with you."

Aziz was still angry at being treated in such a manner. "Have the men assembled in the main square immediately Colonel," Aziz snapped. "They need to be ready to leave in minutes."

“As you wish highness,” the Colonel said as he retreated into the doorway that he had spent the past few moments barring.

Aziz swore out loud as the door shut firmly into place. He knew that his younger brother was perfectly well and the only reason he was playing-sick was due to their confrontation earlier in the day. Withdrawing from his dark reverie he shouted, “Form up.”

The men who had travelled with him from the villa quickly dismounted and fell in, waiting in silence. Prince Henry, Paul and Adaq made their way round to the front of the column as a large gate began to open slowly on the opposite side of the square. Several hundred men poured out from the portal and formed up alongside the men who were already in position. Unlike the usual members of Alfuhalli’s Personal Guard, these men were garbed in tanned leather: perfect camouflage in the sandy wastes of the Rigarian desert.

One of the men, obviously the officer in charge, rode up to Sheikh Aziz and saluted, “Captain Rehman reporting highness.”

Aziz took a moment to study the man. He was clearly not of Rigarian ancestry; his skin was too pale and his hair too fair to be a descendent of the desert men. He was much taller and larger in build than any of the other men in his company and had collected various scars on his exposed arms and face.

Sensing that he was coming under scrutiny he answered Aziz's question before it was asked, "Foreign Legion highness. My chums are the most fearsome band of cutthroats, criminals and ex-mercenaries on the border."

"I see," Aziz said a little taken aback. He had heard stories of the Foreign Legion who operated patrols between the disputed border with Heim. They were notorious for their complete lack of principles, often causing diplomatic incidents when prisoners and civilians were executed and were reputedly involved in the most recent massacre that had shocked the region. However, the fear they inspired in their enemies and their efficiency in battle had encouraged the Al-Rigarians not to disband the regiment. The men had all sworn loyalty to the sheikh and converted to the Nasir religion when they had entered service. "How many men Rehman? And what nationality?" Aziz inquired of his new command.

"Five hundred highness," he replied as he straightened his tanned leather tunic. "And we have the usual suspects highness. Tsukese refugees, Sobriun criminals and Yonsi pirates..." seeing the sheikh and prince's joint reactions to his response, the captain brought his narrative to an end. "All good men though highness. I'd give my life for any of them and they'd do the same," the captain reported with pride.

Adaq was wondering to himself how such a man ever became an officer, let alone reached the rank of captain. The man was clearly a bruiser more suited to the rank of corporal, yet the Foreign Legion had served the crown well in the past several conflicts along the border with Heim. “I bet they would,” the advisor conceded in response. “How well do you know the land between here and The Great Wall?” Adaq asked.

“Like the back of my hand, err...” the man paused, at a loss as how to address the sheikh’s advisor, “...sir?”

“General,” Adaq aided the man. Though not a military man, Aziz had seen fit to bestow his old friend with a high ranking title. It was one that caused Adaq much amusement but that also allowed him to deal with military matters without constantly having to pass orders via Aziz.

“Sorry general,” Rehman responded. He drew himself upright in his saddle and threw Adaq a clumsy salute. It was obvious to all that Captain Rehman was more suited to the savagery of the battlefield rather than the pleasantries of the drill square and the officer’s mess. “I often patrol between here and the wall general. Even been on a few sorties beyond it but that’s strictly hush-hush,” he added, lowering his voice.

“We can discuss such matter later captain,” Aziz said who had overheard the exchange despite Rehman’s attempt to whisper. “We’re happy with you and your men look like they’re in excellent condition,” the sheikh said. He knew that his brother considered the Foreign Legion to be nothing more than a group of godless thugs and criminals who only fought for the generous salaries offered by the Al-Rigarian Royal Army. Many nobles despised them and didn’t trust them despite their value to the continued existence of the Kingdom. However, the sheikh could be certain of their loyalty to him and not to his brother and was pleased that he didn’t have to contend with a conceited officer of the City Wacth or his brother’s Personal Guard. “But there is one more person who I need to take with me.”

“The lady Shahad?” Rehman guessed.

“How do you know of her presence here?” Adaq instantaneously went on the defensive. Only the soldiers who had escorted them into the city had known of her attendance and he took pride in the counter-intelligence organisation that he had put in place throughout the Kingdom.

“She was making ready in the servant’s courtyard as I left...just saddling her horse and fixing supplies in her bag general,” Rehman explained. “I didn’t speak to her and only noticed her...nothing taboo.”

It was obvious to all observing that the captain thought he had overstepped the strict conventions of Nasir Law and their attitude towards gender segregation. Putting the man at ease, Aziz said, “I’m sure you were the perfect gentleman captain.”

Unable to hide his smirk, Rehman responded, “Of course highness. She’ll be through shortly.”

“Excellent,” Aziz retorted. He was eager to get on his way and, though Captain Rehman appeared to be the perfect man for the job, he wanted to keep tabs on the brash officer, “Sergeant Major Mulnazi,” the sheikh bellowed in the direction of the assembled ranks. The newly promoted soldier marched up to the sheikh and threw him a smart salute.

“This is my sergeant major captain. His name is Derek Mulnazi and from this moment forwards he is also your Sergeant Major.”

Derek and Rehman eyed one another for a moment, each of them measuring up the other before Derek said, “Pleased to serve under you captain.”

“Sure you’ll be a good lad,” Rehman responded.

As the small gate that led into the servant’s courtyard was raised to allow a mounted Shahad to emerge, the call to prayer sounded. Looking

around Aziz realised that none of the men in tanned leather had moved a muscle and only a few of his Personal Guard had felt the urge to practise their religious rites. Though they could technically avoid praying as they were engaged in their duty to their ordained monarch, many men in other regiments still chose to pray when the call was sounded. That they didn't proved their loyalty to the sheikh and highlighted the rift that was growing between the monarchy and the more devout members of the population

Shahad rode up to the sheikh and fell in alongside him and, though her veil hid her visage and lips from view, Aziz knew that she was smiling.

Lottë followed Shahad out of the smaller courtyard. She briefly made a signal to Paul who responded back with a complex hand gesture; a secret form of communication known only amongst the elite of the Rubrumterran Intelligence Corps. Without so much as a word, she then turned on her mount and darted out of the keep's gates and into the throng of the city.

"Where is she going?" Henry asked.

"To join with Magda," the spymaster responded.

Aidan Baines watched in wonder as his master entered successive trances. It was obvious to the former naval officer that the cloaked figure was trying his best to perform another ancient feat that he had learnt from the scroll. It was also obvious that he was failing.

As the tall nobleman slumped in his saddle, Aidan grabbed the dark garment of clothing that had concealed his identity for the entire period of the journey. “Careful master,” he said. “It’s a nasty fall.”

The man seemed to regain consciousness at his servant’s sudden touch and pierced Aidan with his words, “Unhand me,” he snapped in foul temper. “I don’t need your help. I am merely overexerted...but not enough that I couldn’t burn you and that wretched mule of yours to the ground.”

Aidan awkwardly removed his grip; he had learnt the hard way not to anger the powerful man who he had once considered his ally. Thinking back on the day that he had first met the character, Aidan reflected on the odd nature of their relationship and cursed the occasion simultaneously.

It had been a wet and chilly evening in the Rubrumterran capital of Partallow. Aidan had recently returned home from sea only to be greeted by the Ferocian creditors who had threatened him with his life. In addition to the customary intimidation, the Ferocians had learnt of one of the first officer’s

most recent affairs and had been threatening to inform his wife should they not receive what was due to them.

"Pay by the end of the week or we'll tell the fine lady," the leader of the group had stated. "And after that we'll take a finger a day until we get what you owe us." Just to ensure that Aidan didn't forget the meeting anytime soon, the leader of the group had unleashed a huge right fist into the stomach of the cowering naval officer.

Completely at a loss and certainly facing a dishonourable discharge should his debt and various affairs become public knowledge, the once proud man had wept openly and cursed the day he had taken up cards.

The following day, while he had been deciding how best to deal with his misgivings, he had received a royal edict from a scribe ordering him to meet at one of the seedier taverns in the merchant's quarter of the city. Assuming that his creditors had revealed the balance of his account to a senior member of the navy and he was to be punished at a discreet location, Aidan had given in to the inevitable and made his way to the rendezvous. However, when he had arrived at the tavern, he had been ushered by the same scribe into a private room at the rear of the establishment. There he had met a tall man who had promised to solve all of his problems should he 'do him a service' in the future. Aidan had humoured the man, a little intimidated that he had kept his identity

a secret and baffled as to how he had found out about his difficulties, but thoroughly expected nothing to come from the encounter.

However, several hours later, as the naval officer departed an upmarket gambling hall, he heard a commotion in one of the nearby streets. With nothing better to do, Aidan had made his way over to the crowd that had gathered around a spectacle in the centre of the street. He had used his rank, thinking that it would have been for the last time, to push to the front of the gathered mob and then stopped. Before him had lain the Ferocian creditors who had made his life such a misery...

“Stop daydreaming Baines,” the same hooded figure said, bringing the former naval officer out of his reverie.

“Sorry sir,” Aidan replied.

“I need you to pay attention,” the nobleman said.

Again the tall man entered a trance whilst the two mules and their passengers trudged towards their destination.

The column had taken longer to leave the city than was to Adaq’s liking but, with their Foreign Legionnaires in tow, the assembled group of mounted

soldiers made their way back into the desolate expanses of the Rigarian desert. Preferring the hustle and bustle of cities and the intrigues of court, Adaq was forced to concede that there was a natural beauty to the desert that appealed to him. He wasn't sure if it was his heritage or the way that the heat distorted the light as it escaped the trappings of the sand dunes; but there was something special about the place.

"What's up ahead?" Prince Henry asked.

Adaq immediately focussed his attention on the horizon, leaving his musings for another time. "I can't see anything," he replied.

Paul, Henry, Aziz and Shahad all laughed at the response of Al-Rigar's first advisor.

"What?" Adaq asked a little confused.

Henry cleared his throat and regained his composure. "I meant," he started, "what lies on the road ahead? Are there any fortifications or cities?"

"Oh," Adaq blushed. "There aren't any settlements. This area has long been contested by Heim, the Tsukese and ourselves. Centuries of war have made it an undesirable place to live."

“Also there isn’t any water here,” Shahad added. “Unlike the rest of Rigar, there aren’t any oases and crops can’t grow in the land anywhere.”

Feeling a little undermined that he wasn’t giving the lecture to the foreign prince, Sheikh Aziz added, “It wasn’t until the Tsukese retreated behind The Great Wall and we beat the Republic back into their traditional homelands that we managed to pacify our north-eastern domain. Only the garrisons and the small civilisations along The Great Wall allow us to keep our territory here.”

Henry had been fully aware from his tutoring during his youth of the area’s scarcity of resources and people, yet he wasn’t aware of how dire the situation was. He pondered the revelation a little, “So what could be their plan?” he asked out loud. “They had no water with them, no supplies...how do they plan to survive for the next few days?”

“I don’t know,” Adaq admitted. “They could have secured supplies from the same farmstead that they stole the mules from?” he offered to the group.

“No,” Shahad interjected. Something forbidden for a woman to do, yet the exotic noblewoman knew that Adaq would value her input. “When I spoke to the farmer’s wife, she said that they had taken only the mules before murdering her husband and burning down their house.”

The group had seen the smoke from the road and had headed in that direction. It had allowed them to pick up the track of the two fugitives. The party had been horrified by the death and destruction that they had found at the once prosperous smallholding but the dead man's wife had refused to show herself in public despite the terrible ordeal she had experienced. As the only woman there, Shahad had gone inside to comfort her.

"There must be something...something you don't know about," Paul added to the conversation.

"Adaq?" the sheikh asked.

Though Aziz was reluctant to appear misinformed in front of Henry and Paul, he understood the urgency of the situation and deferred to his old friend's superior knowledge of trade routes and Rigarian geography. However, Adaq seemed baffled, "There's nothing," he answered. "Between here and The Great Wall there's only our border garrisons and a long dusty road of nothingness."

"So what is his plan?" Henry asked.

As he was no expert in the specific area, it was unexpected when Paul answered the question, "I'm sure he has something up his sleeve. He's already

thrown a giant fireball capable of engulfing an entire ship and managed to transport two people the length of a city."

The others remained silent as their thoughts turned dark; contemplating what lay in wait for them on the road ahead.

This time the tall nobleman fell from the saddle, landing on the floor with an audible grunt.

"Sir?" Aidan inquired.

"Water...bring me water," he croaked.

Aidan slipped down from his mule, withdrawing a flask from one of the saddle bags at the same time. Though he was getting on in years, he was still lithe enough to perform physical feats that eluded men half his age. "Here sir," he said, handing over the carafe.

"What was it?" Aidan asked.

"None of your business," the hooded figure seemed irritable after his exertions. "But help is on its way. We'll stay here until it arrives and you'll get your reward at last. Guard my body until I regain consciousness, I'm going to..." his sentence was cut short as his eyes rolled and he passed out.

Aidan was unsure what to do. The man he now served had shown his true colours during their flight from Partallow and the old sailor hadn't liked what he had seen. This was his one and only opportunity to take advantage of the man; whilst he was sleeping and unable to defend himself. *But what options do I have?* He thought to himself. They were being pursued by the Al-Rigarian army to the south, to the north lay yet more Rigarian soldiers stationed along the border with the Tsukese and to the east and west there was nothing but empty desert for hundreds of miles. With no food and very little water he had no choice but to sit and wait for his mysterious employer to regain consciousness. Drawing his sword and perching on a nearby rock, he again thought back to how he had gotten himself into this situation.

After the deaths of the moneylenders life had continued as usual for Aidan. He served the crown admirably, continued to have affairs and gambled every penny that he earned. He became indebted to new creditors but not to the same extravagant sums as he previously had. He was ecstatic with his good fortune and completely forgot about the past.

However, several months later the same scribe came to visit him. The man had again given him message, though this time it was more forceful in its demands. The same anonymous man wished to receive a favour in exchange for ridding him of his financial burdens. Aidan had almost ignored the note, he

had considered not attending whatsoever, yet, after much consideration, he had attended the meeting.

The man had asked several seemingly innocent questions of the naval officer. He seemed interested in the tidal cycles in the Anriac Bay and the composition of various crews aboard merchant ships sailing for the crown. Aidan had gotten drunk during the interview and revealed much more than he should have: the locations of secret naval installations around the Anriac Bay, the size and composition of naval crews and other fragments of vital information. Aidan had woken the following day with a bad hangover and little recollection of what had transpired the previous evening.

The following month was the worst in the history of the Royal Navy since the fall of the empire and the end of colonialism. Pirates intercepted Rubrumterran merchant and naval ships alike; nowhere was safe for them. Eventually the admiralty had been forced to change all orders for the forthcoming year and things returned to usual, yet Aidan couldn't help but feel responsible for the losses of so many vessels and lives.

Again he had been visited by the strange scribe who again had beckoned him to the same tavern and the company of the hooded nobleman. However, this time proceedings had been different. The hooded man had immediately gone on the offensive; claiming that he had done much to help the veteran

naval officer before accusing Aidan of treason. Aidan had been taken aback by the onslaught but hadn't been able to deny the accusations, particularly when the mysterious man had presented him with compelling evidence of treason. From that day forward, Aidan had found himself obeisant to the needs of an unknown master.

The old scholar woke with a start. The message had been brief but the significance of the plea was not lost on him. Quickly dressing he called for a Page who entered without knocking on the old oak door that served as a portal to his chambers. *After all these years, I still don't command the same respect as the lowliest of soldiers*, he thought to himself.

"Sir?" the Page said, he had clearly been sleeping.

"I need to convey a message," the old man answered abruptly, "To our master."

Understanding the significance of the man's disturbed slumber, the Page left instantly to ready the carriage reserved for such an event.

Knowing that things were coming to a head, the old scholar sighed inwardly. He had spent a lifetime trying to uncover the Tabula and the secrets held within the ancient scroll. Unlike his master and many others who had

sought the old document for personal gain, his curiosity was purely academic. He knew that what transpired in the next few days would change the world forever.

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Paul sensed an unnatural tremor and immediately knew that the thief was communicating with another individual. He had successfully blocked his last attempt but now he was exhausted and running low on Manaa.

“What is it?” Adaq asked, seeing the spy’s face drain of colour.

“He managed to get a message out,” Paul responded. He had given up trying to keep anything from the gifted Rigarian, instead opting to work with him in unison.

“Who to?” Adaq inquired eager to discover the identity of the culprits.

“No idea,” Paul conceded, “And no idea where it went either.”

“You couldn’t discern anything?” Henry joined the conversation.

“No,” Paul admitted. “Only that whoever he contacted is going to be sending him aid. We need to hurry,” he added urgently.

General Saleh, commander of the north of all Al-Rigar and distant cousin to the sheikh, had spent the entirety of his career patrolling the border with the Tsukese. Initially a conscript of the lowest rank, he had risen to his position through a lifetime of hard work and by proving his ability time and time again. He was a decorated veteran who had helped the sheikh’s family gain power and had earned the respect of the New Sobriun mercenaries that were assigned to him. He had over ten thousand men, around half of which were New Sobriun, under his command.

“What is it?” he asked an out of breath lieutenant who had recently entered his command post.

“There’s a lot of activity along the wall,” the red faced officer responded.

“Anything unusual?” Saleh asked. He was used to such false alarms; they happened frequently.

“Yes general,” the man replied.

Thinking it nothing but an incompetent officer new to the region who'd spent most of his life living in the comfortable trappings of luxury; Saleh left his desk and headed for the door. Most young officers tended to be from wealthy families, their parents having paid corrupt military officials for their commissions. It was a fact of life that the old commander despised but could do nothing about.

Leaving the relative comfort of his command post, Saleh's eyes grew wide as he beheld the scene before him. In the steadily growling light of the morning, he saw tens of thousands of torches moving along the vast battlements of The Great Wall. "Lieutenant," he said. "Order all patrols back to The Great Gate immediately...as quickly as they can ride."

"Yes general," the lieutenant said as he disappeared into the darkness.

Saleh tried to estimate the size of the force mobilising atop the wall but quickly lost count. One thing he did realise from his brief assessment was that he was hopelessly outnumbered.

"Captain!" he bellowed to his second in command.

Shahad rode side by side with Aziz, reluctant to leave him following her ordeal in Qahtani. She knew that Alfie was strictly conservative, but had no

idea of the resentment that he harboured towards women. Once they made camp, she had resolved that she would reveal everything that she had learnt about Alfie's disdain for her to the sheikh. In the meantime however, she was content to continue in the group's journey northwards.

Rehman, the leader of the Foreign Legion, approached the sheikh and the noblewoman, closely followed by his new sergeant major, Derek. "Highness," the captain inquired.

"Yes Rehman?" Aziz responded.

"The sergeant major and I have been talking and…well, we think it'd be a good idea to push on through the night and the day."

Aziz looked a little puzzled by the statement, his curious glance being answered by Derek. "There's nowhere for them to run highness. If they go north they run into Commander Saleh, if they go south they meet our column. Everywhere else there's desert."

"So why not simply wait them out? Let them suffer from exposure and starvation?" Shahad spoke out of place as a woman.

Ignoring the breach of protocol, Derek answered to the woman directly, "the message lady. That Rubrumterran might not have figured out what was being said but I'd wager my life that it was a cry for help. It's what I'd do."

“I agree,” Captain Rehman echoed.

“Hmm…but what kind of help?” Aziz mused out loud.

This time it was Prince Henry who answered, “Giant winged demons, fireballs the size of ships. Whatever it is, I agree with these two. We need to get there before help arrives.”

“Is that possible?” Aziz now turned to Paul who had become his temporary aide regarding anything Manaa related. Adaq hadn’t been fazed by the sheikh’s preference of the Rubrumterran spymaster; the man possessed a superior knowledge of all things unnatural.

“Anything is possible with this man highness. He’s already proven that I’m no match for his abilities,” Paul conceded.

“Adaq?” the sheikh always sought reassurance from his oldest friend and advisor.

“It makes sense,” Adaq responded, deep in thought, “but I suggest we send a scouting party ahead of the column. We could be walking into a trap that would see two of the most important noblemen in four continents killed.”

“Agreed,” the sheikh said, “Will you see to that captain?” he asked of Rehman.

“Yes highness,” Captain Rehman said before riding to the rear of the column with his new sergeant major to relay orders.

“I just hope his friends aren’t as powerful as he is,” Paul said to nobody in particular.

Aidan watched as his master stirred, gradually gaining consciousness after his monumental exertion. “Are you ok sir” he asked the hooded figure.

“Water,” the man demanded, not acknowledging the old sailor’s concern.

Aidan realised that the flask containing the last of the water had fallen from the man’s hands when he had lost consciousness. He quickly retrieved the bottle from the sand and passed it to the tall nobleman who drank deeply, finishing the bottle. He was about to scold his assistant when his entire body went rigid and, once more, he entered a trance.

“How are you?” a voice asked from hundreds of miles away.

“Ok,” the exhausted nobleman responded, “though I could use a little more vitality.”

“Use your Manaa,” the sagacious voice informed. “You won’t be able to fend off all your assailants with what you have left and help is on its way. They’ll be there in less than a day.”

The mysterious man had no idea who ‘they’ were but presumed that the reinforcements would be travelling by unnatural means. The wall was several days ride away, giving the hooded figure hope that the reinforcements would be members of his order.

“Should I use all of it?” he asked, referring to what little Manaa he had remaining.

“Yes,” the old scholar responded. “They’ll be bringing more with them. Rejuvenate yourself and then hide.”

“Yes master,” he responded.

The conversation came to an end as abruptly as it had started. However, the tall nobleman didn’t have any time to waste. Concentrating fiercely and using almost all of his remaining Manaa supplies, the man drained the energy from the odd purple rock, restoring his depleted reserves and bringing his body back from the brink of fatigue. He felt the powerful life force of the unnatural rock flowing through his veins and breathed in deeply. He knew that it had been a necessary sacrifice of the precious mineral, but now, with very little

remaining, he was fully aware of his vulnerability. Eyeing Aidan he knew that his best course of action was to allow the man to live and not reveal his weakness to his pet: he was much more likely to survive with an able swordsman at his side.

"Sir?" Aidan inquired tentatively.

"Everything's fine. Help is on its way, but we need to find a good place to hide until it gets here," he surmised.

Aidan looked around hopefully, "sir, there isn't anywhere."

"Of course there is," the hooded figure responded. "Over there, by that small outcropping of rocks."

Aidan looked on in disbelief but made his way over to the miniscule pile of rocks that his master intended them to hide behind. "Now what?" he asked rather grumpily.

The tall nobleman closed his eyes for one last time, the remaining pile of Manaa crackling audibly in his pocket as it was purged of energy. Aidan's eyes grew wide with reverence as a translucent dome encapsulated the two. They were hidden from view from anybody outside of the protective shell.

Commander Saleh had withdrawn his forces a good distance from the wall and watched on in curiosity as tens of thousands of torches were extinguished along the colossal battlements. Now that the sun had risen beyond the wall, the flames were no longer necessary for light and the old Rigarian campaigner could make out the sheer mass of bodies aligned on the wall.

“How many patrols have returned?” he asked the nearest officer.

“Most of them sir,” the frightened looking officer replied. “We’re only waiting for two more.”

It was the first good news that the general had heard since the mobilisation had started on the other side of the barrier between his kingdom and the Tsukese Empire. “How long can we expect the others to be?” he asked the same man.

“We haven’t heard back from the messengers dispatched to retrieve them,” the officer stuttered back.

The commander dismissed the officer who hurriedly moved in the direction of several other frightened young men. *Typical*, Saleh thought to himself. *Battle is yet to commence and already the undeserving rich-boys who had their rank purchased by their families are considering fleeing.* Trying his

best to forget about the group, he turned his mind towards the formation he had employed in front of the gate. It was made up of the battle tested veterans; men who would rather die than see one Tsukese soldier make their way into their lands. The commander knew that they would hold fast while lesser men would flee: the only problem was that he didn't have enough of them.

His musings were disturbed as a sound not heard in over a century filled the air: The Great Gate was grating slowly open.

"There was another message," Paul informed the group heading the party.

"What was it?" Adaq asked.

"Bad news. It seems Magda and Lottë aren't the only keepers of the ancient roads," Paul revealed. "One leads from The Great Gate to Qahtani and hundreds of soldiers are making their way here!"

"I don't understand," Shahad and Adaq proclaimed in unison.

Henry, whose posture had noticeably changed at the mention of Magda's name, answered the question for them. "It's an old magic," he

started. “One that only a few can control but that has the power to bring Kings to their knees.”

“And it’s a power that has to be inherited,” Paul added.

“What do you mean?” This time Henry joined Adaq and Shahad as they spoke in harmony.

“The blood from the nobles of the Old Empire was entwined in its construction. Only they are able to shift them from sight or into being. It’s the reason why I didn’t report them as a threat to the government at large,” he continued. “As far as I knew, only Magda and Lottë had the power to command them.”

“These roads run through Al-Rigar?” Adaq asked. He was familiar with the myth, yet had no idea that they actually existed, nor that they were still functioning.

“Most are dysfunctional, not been used in a millennia. But in Sobrius they are still active, though only two people have the ability to use them,” Paul paused, unsure how much to reveal. “But in Rigar most of them were either closed for good during the pretender’s uprising or are left open.”

“Left open?” Shahad asked.

“The road we walk on now was once grand beyond reckoning. Huge domed towers would have adorned either side where weary travellers could have rested, fortresses would have been dispersed equally to protect the people and warehouses of unimaginable size would have stored citizen’s goods.”

“So what happened?” Shahad asked, unsure whether or not to believe the foreign spy.

“Weather, war, looters, the desert; the usual things. The knowledge of the past is lost and now we have to build over what our forefathers left before us.”

“You mean this road is built over the ancient road?” Adaq observed acutely.

“In a sense, yes.” Paul confirmed.

“So whoever is coming to the aid of the mysterious thief and Aidan will bump directly into us?” Adaq continued with his surmise.

“Yes,” Paul confirmed.

The group fell silent as comprehension finally dawned on them and they realised the impossibility of the task they faced.

Meanwhile Henry's mind was elsewhere, "Now I know what she meant," he mumbled to himself but loud enough for Paul to overhear.

"What who meant?" the spy inquired.

"Magda," the prince responded, "when I accused her of being a noble. She told me she was a noble *of sorts*."

Nobody else commented on the revelation.

General Saleh had no idea what was going on. His combined command of New Sobriun mercenaries and Al-Rigarian regulars were coming under a barrage of projectile weapons that weren't supposed to have the range to trouble them. In addition to this, the soldiers that he had expected to engage, those pouring out of The Great Gate, were making their way around his men and under an archway where they vanished. Not only did the veteran find their disappearance worrying; he was fretful as, several minutes earlier, the archway had not existed. An old man in a dark robe had been escorted to the sight of the archway where he had summoned the ancient doorway.

This was the most fun that the old scholar had experienced in his entire life. The decades spent pouring over tomes of literature, the endless research and all of his failed experiments cumulated in this moment. He had proven his bloodline. He had proven that his ancestors had been the ones to stop the pretender from ravishing Tsukese lands a millennium ago. And now he and his family would lead the empire to greatness with the knowledge of the Tabula. After all, his brother was *the* Emperor.

Though General Saleh wasn't entirely sure what was happening, he hadn't earned his rank through tactical ignorance and general naivety. It was obvious to any student of military tactics that the men atop the wall were merely a distraction designed to keep his soldiers at bay, whilst the soldiers vanishing beneath the arch were significant to their objective: *whatever that was?* he thought to himself.

"Sergeant," he called to one of his trusted veterans.

"Yes general." The man's discipline was instantaneous despite the chaos erupting around him.

"Have the officers from the right flank report to me at once," he ordered the man.

“Already done,” the soldier was an island of calm in a sea of pandemonium.

Several minutes later the sergeant returned leading seven bloodied and weary looking men. It was obvious that they had all been leading from the front; the less able officers who’d had their commissions purchased had already fled.

“We need to hit that,” Saleh said bluntly and threw out an arm in the general direction of the newly appeared archway. He took a moment to judge their reactions and, with none of the men showing any outward signs of fear in the face of the mammoth task that stood before them, he continued. “You lads are the unlucky sods who will have to do it. We’ll switch the focus of our archers in the right flank from the men exiting the gate and the men on the wall to the soldiers queuing up. After the second volley the infantry will charge the gate, after the fourth volley the archers will drop their bows, draw swords, and do the same.”

“Yes general,” the men spoke as one.

“Any questions?” Saleh asked, not expecting a response and getting none. “Good!” he said abruptly. “Back to your posts and inform your men.

There'll be a brief beat of the Darbuka to signal the attack, the first volley is to be released once the rhythm ends."

As the men moved back to their respective positions within the frenzied ranks, the commander took a moment to consider things before giving the signal. It was often in these moments of peace, whilst surrounded by mayhem, that he found his mind wonder to the oddest of subjects. This time he found himself mulling over the Dabuka, the small wooden drum formed by tightly pulling a goat's skin over a timber frame, and its origin. He knew that the instrument had been all but outlawed by the Muntiari as music was strictly forbidden under Nasir doctrine; however some of the instruments had survived to be used for military purposes.

Escaping his trance, he signalled to the drummers to start. It was the last thing he ever did. A stray ballista fully cut the old soldier in half and he died knowing nothing of the pain.

Not far from the general's corpse, the beat of the Dabuka ceased and the Rigarian forces, allied with their New Sobriun counterparts, began their assault of the archway.

The old scholar watched in amusement as several arrows rebounded off an invisible barrier that protected him from their sharp points. He had not survived for so many decades without taking necessary precautions against such mundane attacks and had erected several additional wards before venturing onto the field of battle. Two of the men detailed to protect him had fallen to the volley and now his surviving protectors were ushering him back behind the safety of The Great Wall. He strolled recreationally towards the portal, as if he was nothing more than an elderly gentleman enjoying a stroll in the mid-morning sunlight.

A second volley of arrows was deflected by the unseen barrier as the man continued in his leisurely parade through The Great Gate and was accompanied by the screams of hundreds of men who did not enjoy such luxuries. As he crossed the threshold the old scholar looked back and was distressed by the scene unfolding on the plain behind him.

The Rigarian archers had cleared many of the soldiers occupying the column between The Great Gate and the archway that he had mustered. Now the entire right flank of their infantry was charging towards the unprepared soldiers of the empire. The commander in charge of the filing imperial soldiers was trying his best to arrange them into combat positions but it appeared that his efforts would fail: there wasn’t enough time.

The old scholar's panic didn't last long; in the barbican and beyond were tens of thousands of imperial soldiers waiting to take their dead comrade's place. They would soon quash the Rigarian counterattack and things could continue as planned.

Concentrating to relay the setback to his apprentice, the old scholar realised that he did enjoy being the emperor's brother.

"Something went wrong," Paul said.

"What is it?" Adaq inquired.

"He sent another message," the spy informed the group, "rather…he received another message."

"Did you get it?" Henry asked. "Do you know where he is?" the prince added.

"Yes," Paul paused. It was difficult for him to fully understand the message as Tsukese wasn't his strongest of languages, yet he was gradually coming to grips with interpreting the key facts. "There's a problem at the wall," he started. "Some kind of counter attack by the Rigarians and the New Sobriun mercenaries."

“Commander Saleh,” Aziz said in admiration. “I knew I could always rely on him.”

“He’s dead,” Paul said bluntly, still trying to muster the intellect to decipher the remainder of the message.

“How?” Adaq asked. He seemed visibly shocked by the revelation.

“A ballista guided by one of the order,” Paul replied.

“What order?” Adaq and Aziz both seemed eager to enact revenge on the assailant.

“The same one as the man who conveyed the message…and…the thief,” Paul realised out loud. “They noticed a man giving orders in the ranks below the wall and ordered him shot. But not before he had commanded an attack on the archway.”

“An attack on the archway?” Shahad asked; a little confused.

“Many of the roads built by the Old Empire would have had an archway integrated into their very fabric to indicate their origin. Once travellers passed through the archway, they would become invisible to anybody outside. It was a simple method of protecting merchants and other roamers from harm but one that employed powerful knowledge of light and used much Manaa.” Paul

answered dutifully. He felt guilty that he was divulging the secrets of the ancient roadways, though any one of his travelling companions could simply pick up a book in any library in The Four Continents to learn the truth. It was only because the roads were considered myth that nobody paid attention to their presence or power.

"But why attack the archway?" Henry was stupefied by the late general's decision, "Why not simply withdraw and regroup?"

"If I know General Saleh, *and I do*, he'd have had a reason for doing it. Adaq?" Aziz asked his old companion.

"There could be several explanations but it is probably one of three," Adaq replied. He had been deep in thought since the revelation, considering what might be happening at The Great Wall. "Firstly," he extended a finger to exaggerate the point, "it could be because he believed the archway was significant. He must have recognised its importance without entirely knowing what it can do and sought to gain advantage militarily by taking the position. Secondly," this time he extended two fingers, "he could've had no other choice. He might have been so outnumbered that he just wanted to cause some damage before he was routed. And finally," this time the advisor forgot to extend a finger, "he could have been thinking that he could use the archway as a means of escape."

Without so much as pausing to think who he was talking to, Paul asked, “How many men do you have along The Great Wall?”

Aziz weighed up the situation for a moment before deciding that it would be best to be frank with the foreign spy, “Just over seven thousand of our own and three thousand New Sobriuns.”

“And how many Tsukese are on the other side?” The spy continued his interrogation of the sheikh.

“We don’t know…around fifty thousand…a hundred thousand if they emptied the garrisons of nearby cities,” the sheikh responded.

“I just wish I knew who was controlling Aidan….do you think Adalella or Duki could command such respect from the Tsukese? Enough for them to send a hundred thousand men to their aid?”

“No.” It was Shahad who answered. “They’re both better known for their sordid escapades than their political manoeuvring. “

“But if one of them were in possession of the Tabula?” Paul prompted.

“Any nation would mobilise a hundred thousand soldiers for them.” Adaq finished Paul’s thought.

Henry had fallen silent as the others had continued their discussion, but now he spoke up. “Paul,” he started, “you said that you knew where the message originated from, not just what it contained.”

In all of the speculation and debate, Paul had completely forgotten about the most important thing. “Yes, but I can’t be sure exactly,” he said. “But they’re close.”

“Where?” Aziz asked.

“In that direction,” Paul said as he pointed in a north westerly direction.

Without so much as a word, Aziz turned his mount in the direction that Paul had just pointed and started at a canter. He knew the others and the remainder of the column wouldn’t be too far behind.

The right flank had stormed the archway, cutting down thousands of unprepared Tsukese soldiers before they had organised themselves for battle. However, more and more imperial soldiers were pouring out of the gateway as the battle continued and the left flank was being forced into retreat by the increasing barrage of arrows and ballistae missiles fired from The Great Wall. In addition to this, General Saleh had been killed by one of the Ballistae fired from the wall.

With no real leadership and facing overwhelming odds, the experienced officers who remained alive knew that it was only a matter of time before the army routed. The only incentive that kept them fighting was that they were preventing the imperial troops from their objective: gaining access to the archway and the portal it housed.

"What's wrong sir?" Aidan asked as his master sat bolt upright.

"Nothing," the hooded figure responded. "It just seems that we'll be waiting here a little longer than I first thought." The man continued to sit in the uncomfortable position as, unseen to Aidan beneath the hood that hid his countenance, his eyes narrowed. "What was that?" he voiced his concerns.

He had felt an odd presence, one that he had felt before, when his true master had contacted him. It was only a slight manifestation but one he couldn't help but notice. *Somebody has been listening to us,* the thief realised. He couldn't be sure who the eavesdropper had been but the thing he was sure of was their proximity: they were close.

Though not accustomed to having his knowledge of Manaa challenged, the thief felt secure behind the dome he had conjured to hide them from view.

No man or woman in four continents had ever managed to pierce one of his illusions.

After a hectic gallop Paul brought the column to a halt only a few yards from the side of the road. “They should be somewhere around here,” he said.

“Where?” Prince Henry demanded in frustration.

“Look,” Shahad said.

As one the column peered in the direction that she was pointing and saw what appeared to be two abandoned mules by the roadside. The men who had witnessed the thief’s disappearance at the villa in Qahtani groaned in frustration.

“What is it?” Rehman asked Derek, within earshot of the nobles at the front of the column.

“He’s done this before,” the sergeant major informed Rehman. “When we were in Qahtani, the hooded imp simply wished himself somewhere else and it was so.”

“What…” Rehman started disbelievingly.

“No.” It was Paul who silenced the conversation. He had noticed the spent pile of Manaa that rested in the sand next to the two animals of burden. “He wasn’t strong enough,” he continued his narrative of the situation in a noncommittal tone, “He used the last of his Manaa to repair the damage of his previous exertions.” The entire group were aware that the hooded thief had been overexerting himself. First had been the cataclysmic fireball at sea, followed by the miraculous feat of physically transporting himself and his accomplice in space and then there were the huge efforts of communicating over such vast distances using only his mind. “He’s hiding,” Paul realised.

“Where?” Aziz asked. The chase had lasted far longer than the sheikh had previously expected. Originally, he thought it would be a simple matter of getting to The Great Wall, mobilising the garrisons there, and then simply waiting. He hadn’t anticipated the need for subterfuge in the desert nor the conflict with his brother; it had been a long and tiresome few days and his patience was ebbing.

“I don’t know!” Paul snapped. Having suspected just about everybody, trekked across two continents and nearly lost his life on several occasions; the spymaster was in an equally foul mood.

One person who could always make light of such a situation was Henry. “Shall we do this the old fashioned way?” he suggested rhetorically.

The blithe comment had its intended effect and the atmosphere cleared immediately. Turning to Rehman, Aziz said, “Have your men fan out in parties of twenty. Should they find anything; they should make some noise.”

“Highness.” Rehman seemed pleased that something was finally happening. He wasn’t the kind of man who enjoyed long marches or being idle. He gave a barrage of orders to various groups of soldiers as he rode down the column; the men quickly setting about their tasks.

In no time at all, four hundred men were out searching the desert, a hundred remaining behind to tend to the horses of their dismounted brothers-in-arms. As they dispersed to cover greater ground, the sand on either side of the road began to tremble slightly. But the spectacle went unnoticed by the occupied soldiers.

“What are they doing?” the thief asked.

“I think they’re searching for us,” Aidan replied.

They had watched as, several yards away, the column had come to a halt and the soldiers had dispersed around the immediate area. Though the barrier that the hooded figure had erected around them would not physically stop the soldiers, it had served its purpose in masking their presence as a group had

passed within several inches of them without noticing anything. The soldiers had continued in their search and were now out of earshot.

The thief slapped Aidan around the back of the head and said, “I know that imbecile. I mean why did they stop there?”

Aidan rubbed the back of his head, where a small lump was already starting to form, and answered, “They probably saw the mules.”

“Well why didn’t you hide them?” the thief snapped angrily.

“Sorry sir,” Aidan replied timidly, eager to avoid another slap. Both of the men were more than aware that it would have been impossible to conceal the mules; there was simply nowhere to hide them in the vast expanses of the Rigarian Desert. It was obvious to Aidan that the man was afraid and finding a way to vent his anger. They had no Manaa left and were currently surrounded by Al-Rigarian soldiers; it was not an ideal situation but, so long as they remained hidden behind the protective dome, they should remain undiscovered and safe.

“Where are they?” Henry asked Paul.

“I don’t know highness,” the spy responded. “They couldn’t have gotten far without their transport,” he added.

“So where are they?” the prince repeated.

“Have you considered that they could still be here? Maybe even right in front of us?” Adaq suggested.

“What do you mean?” Henry asked. Though he had been educated in the ways of Manaa and its properties, there was still much that he didn’t know.

“Of course,” Paul said. He was growing ever fonder of the Al-Rigarian first minister, though he still remembered to limit the amount of information that he shared with the man. “Reflective light…it’s so simple.”

“What?” Henry said, utterly confused by the conversation and the direction that it was taking.

“It’s a simple spell highness, one that’s been used for millennia and one that’s used commonly in my trade.” He was careful not to reveal too much to Adaq, “The Manaa is woven so that its energy forms a protective spell around the manipulator. The energy then reflects the light so that the people hiding in the dome become invisible.”

“Sounds…complicated,” Henry deduced.

“Not really,” Paul retorted, “A lot of people in Rubrumterra can do it. It’s what makes my job so difficult.”

“So how do we find them?” Henry asked. He was eager to turn the conversation to matters that he fully understood.

“We have to walk into them,” Paul started, “physically. There is no way to pierce the illusion, unless…”

“What?” Henry and Adaq said at the same time.

“I can’t say right now because I could be standing right next to them. But give me five minutes,” Paul replied.

The half Rigarian, half Rubrumterran pulled a mat from his satchel as if he was about to pray as a member of the Nasir. However, after he had unfurled the rug and laid it out on the floor, he placed a pile of Manaa next to his right knee and entered a trance.

Several hundred beacons of light shone out around him as he reached out with his mind. One after the other he entered their consciousnesses and discarded them as soldiers under the sheikh’s command. The process took a very long time until, abruptly, his mind found a barrier that he couldn’t penetrate. He had been very delicate in his approach and, assuming he hadn’t

been detected, he locked on to the bright life form next to the impenetrable consciousness.

"Hmmm…" the tall nobleman supposed.

He had felt an odd sensation only moments earlier; something he hadn't experienced since his earliest days at the academy. He knew that it had been an attempted invasion of his mind, and he also knew that his wards had managed to resist the attempt.

"Are they coming back anytime soon?" he asked Aidan, who was much more knowledgeable in the ways of the military and the way the search would be conducted. A few moments passed with no reply forthcoming from the sailor before the thief decided to berate him once more, "I said…" the tall nobleman stopped before he had started. Aidan's eyes had glazed over and it was obvious to the nobleman that Aidan was inwardly fighting against an external consciousness.

Perfect! The tall nobleman thought to himself. He knew that both minds would be vulnerable if they were wrestling with one another; it was just the opportunity that he needed to be rid of the enemy spell caster, whoever he was, for good. He could sense some nearby Manaa, the same that Paul had

brought with him, and thought it ironic that he would be using the enemy's own supply to destroy him. Clearing his mind, he reached out with his consciousness.

Paul was getting the better of Aidan. Unlike the untrained common sailor he had possessed days earlier, Mr. Baines had clearly been educated by the Royal Navy to resist such an assault. It had been difficult initially, but with every passing moment he was able to catch glimpses of his thoughts. Soon he would have complete control over the traitor, then he would be able to determine where they were hiding.

He continued to push, exploring every fibre of Aidan's being, finding it easier and easier to overcome the old sailor's defences as they weakened. But then something happened.

"Ahh…" Paul's pain pierced the calm of the Rigarian Desert.

"What is it?" Prince Henry demanded of his subject. But it was too late. Aidan's eyes had rolled into the back of his head and frothy bubbles of blood were forming at the corners of his mouth. Using his index and middle finger, he detected a very weak pulse and was just about to ask two nearby soldiers for help when something unimaginable happened.

Aidan was dazed and disorientated but, despite his stupor, he was still able to observe the spectacle from behind the protective shimmer of the unnatural dome. A huge gate, more ancient than any structure he had ever laid eyes on, larger than the tallest building in all Partallow, had just emerged from the grains of sand. Before he had time to come to grips with what had just unfolded, several imperial soldiers emerged from beneath the arch and charged into the bewildered Rigarian soldiers who had been picketing the mounts.

The tall nobleman watched intently as the imperial soldiers charged into the disorganised rabble of labouring Legionnaires. The first imperial soldier skewered a tanned leather clad man whilst he knelt to change a horse's shoe. He withdrew his sword and sliced all the way through the arm of a second Rigarian as he attempted to draw his sword from his scabbard. The third man he faced was armed and ready as the imperial soldier fell upon him, cutting, parrying and riposting as full battle was joined and mayhem unleashed.

The nobleman viewed the carnage without emotion. Though the imperial troops had caught the Rigarians off guard and had managed to quickly

dispatch over half of them; a lifetime of discipline and training was now paying off for the desert warriors. They had quickly established a line of skirmish and, despite their early losses, still outnumbered the Tsukese by more than two-to-one.

Moments later another band of imperial forces, this time slightly larger than the previous, exited the archway and joined their comrades in the melee.

The battle became frenzied, with neither side using archers nor cavalry, but instead relying on the edges of their blades to do the killing. Men would slip on the blood of their fallen comrades and get their feet caught in the entrails of disembowelled enemies, leaving them vulnerable to the opposition. The hooded figure watched as one man bit into the neck of another whilst they rolled together on the floor: a world descended into chaos.

As the battle progressed, more and more of the Legionnaires abandoned their search for the thief and came to the much needed aid of their comrades. These reinforcements, however, were neutralised by the arrival of yet more imperial soldiers from the ancient archway.

The tall nobleman knew that he had to time his dash for the archway to perfection. He didn't have enough Manaa to move the dome to the portal; he had used the last he could find to deal with the enemy spy. Turning to the

traitor he had employed so long ago he said, “Draw your sword. On the other side of that archway we’ll be safe.”

Aidan Baines got to his feet clumsily. He had been badly affected by the mental attack and was still yet to recover.

“Shahad,” Aziz said to the noblewoman. “Take a squad of soldiers and get Paul back to Qahtani as quickly as possible.”

“I can’t,” she said.

“Why not?” Aziz didn’t consider this a time for wit.

“Your brother,” Shahad said bluntly. “I’ll explain later.”

With no time to lose, Aziz didn’t pursue the matter despite his curiosity. “You three,” he pointed at some Royal Guardsmen detailed to his search party. “Get this man a safe distance from the fighting and ensure to his safety. Before this conflict is over we’re going to need him.”

The three men went about their business, attaching the near dead and still unconscious body of Paul to a stretcher. Before the men had even finished their work, Prince Henry’s body had turned rigid.

“What is it?” Adaq asked.

“Look,” Henry said.

From out of thin air Aidan Baines and the thief materialised, stepping out from behind an invisible shield.

“Shahad…” Aziz started.

“I’ve got him,” she said as she notched an arrow to the longbow that she had already unsheathed. “But it’s a long way,” she added.

Aziz and Henry needed no further invitation; they both drew swords and sprinted in the direction of the two fugitives. Though they were quite a way behind, the two men in the distance were moving rather slowly towards the portal and both Henry and Aziz reckoned they could overtake them before they made it to safety. Several yards behind Adaq followed; his sword also drawn.

As havoc thrived around him, a nameless Rigarian soldier spared a moment to take in what he presumed would be his last few moments of this world. The fighting had disintegrated into brawling. The left flank had managed to remain intact, firing volleys of arrows as they retreated into the expanse of the Rigarian Desert. The right flank, on the other hand, was trapped between the masses of imperial troops and the mysterious archway behind them. He

was disappointed to see so many of his brothers slain or fleeing in terror; it seemed only the New Sobriuns remained. A spear thrust into his spine brought his nonchalance to an end.

“Sir!” Aidan screamed.

The tall nobleman turned around as the arrow knocked him to the floor.

Aidan quickly took the three steps to his fallen master and fell into the sand beside him. The arrow had taken the hood clean off the thief’s head but he was otherwise unhurt. “Are you okay?” Aidan asked.

“My hood?” the man asked.

“Gone,” Aidan replied.

The two had paused only momentarily as the arrow had struck its intended target. They were now only mere yards away from the two men and had watched as the arrow had taken off the thief’s hood, but even at this distance neither of them could make out who it was.

Aidan looked back and saw Prince Henry and the sheikh approaching. Without so much as thinking, he got to his feet and took guard: *it is time to end this!*

Henry and Aziz arrived just as the thief was getting to his feet.

The face that greeted them was one that Henry knew well. He had tutored him as a child, had bettered him more than once in matters of trade, yet he was also somebody who he'd trusted for the majority of his adult life. "Ambassador Xang?" Henry said in exasperation.

"Sorry highness," Ambassador Xang said in his most officious tone. "I have an appointment to keep."

As the thief turned to run towards the portal, a lone imperial soldier emerged from the other side. Xang bellowed some orders in Tsukese and the soldier responded by sprinting in the direction of Aziz and Henry.

Aziz grumbled in frustration and took up guard against his opponent; the newly arrived imperial soldier, and watched as the thief managed to escape once more. To his left there was no such lack of composure forthcoming from Prince Henry. He finally faced Aidan Baines after a chase that had spanned three countries and had nearly cost him his life on several occasions. It had

been the impetus that had driven him for the past week and he was not going to allow him to escape again. This was the man, one of his father's oldest friends and closest allies, who had allowed the most powerful document in The Four Continents to fall into enemy hands. This was the man, his old tutor in the ways of warfare and personal instructor when he had first joined the navy, who had shamed his family and had plotted against them for so long. This was the man he was going to kill.

A nearby clatter of steel on steel rang true from Henry's right and he knew that Aziz had engaged his opponent, but Aidan remained stoic opposite the prince.

"Why did you do it Mr. Baines?" Henry asked through gritted teeth.

"Just got fed up taking orders," the former naval officer replied in defiance.

Both men were trying to provoke the other into making the first move but, with Shahad and Adaq now closing on the scene, Aidan launched a vicious over-handed attack before help could arrive. Henry was barely able to parry the blow and was forced to deflect a second as he struggled with the loose footing of the sand. The duel was intense; Aidan the more experienced swordsman who had schooled Henry in the ways of the blade, but Henry was

the younger, faster and more agile of the two. As with most duels the contest became rhythmic. Aidan would launch two fierce combination attacks before taking a step forward and Henry would block, dodge and duck before moving one pace backwards. Henry was tired and he knew help was coming, yet he wanted to finish his fellow countryman and onetime comrade himself: it was a matter of honour.

Aidan had just come to the end of a savage combination attack, one that had nearly cost Henry his left ear, and was just about to advance forward a step when Henry did something unexpected. He too advanced forward, rendering their blades useless as their torsos pressed up against one another and their blades both pointed away from their combined mass. Henry dropped his sword and grabbed Aidan around the throat, the traitor falling to the ground under the prince's heavy frame and brute strength. Aidan fought for the first few moments, his hands raking Henry's face, but his strength was no match for the prince's superior power and, as his lips turned blue and blood vessels began to burst, he gave in to the inevitable.

Adaq and Shahad arrived at the scene just as Henry was rising from above the lifeless form of Aidan Baines. Aziz had also managed to get the better of his companion who now lay sprawled out on the desert floor, a puddle of crimson blood gathering around the still form.

Shahad, who had no problem with bodies that had been pierced by arrows or hacked by a sword, had to turn away from what once had been Aidan Baines for fear of being sick at the sight of the body. Despite her unease, she still remained focussed on the task at hand. “What do we do now?” she asked.

Everywhere they looked men were dying. The tanned leather tunics of the Legionnaires and the dull grey metallic breastplates of the imperial soldiers were stained red with blood as they fought with one another. It was impossible to tell who was winning the encounter as soldiers from both sides were so completely covered in blood, sand and dirt that the four nobles couldn’t make out who their own soldiers were. The three men took in the scene around them and, without speaking; they knew what they had to do.

“We follow Xang.” It was Adaq who broke the silence.

“Yes,” Aziz agreed.

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Ambassador Xang sprinted down the ancient thoroughfare as fast as his legs could possibly move. Unlike the Carriers Guild in Heim, which he knew everything about and had studied thoroughly, his master had been able to unlock the true secrets of the Old Empire’s roads. The order had been able,

with the aid of much Manaa and generations of research, to fully restore one of the old roads in secret. The road did much more than hide travellers and dissolve into the environment on a whim; it could also speed up travel remarkably. Though he was still several days ride from The Great Wall using conventional means, he knew he would be there in a matter of minutes. It was something that the order had been working on for decades in anticipation of this moment. The one thing that did worry him was the lack of imperial soldiers heading in the opposite direction, there should have been more.

The battle raged on and still the New Sobriun mercenaries stood strong. They refused to allow the imperial forces entry to the archway despite overwhelming odds and the large scale desertion of the Al-Rigarian soldiers. Their commander, a tall red haired man with several missing digits on his left hand, cut down imperial soldier after imperial soldier, determined to hold the position until his death. The mercenaries were motivated, organised and numbered several experienced practitioners of Manaa manipulation in their number.

For every mercenary that fell, twenty imperial soldiers paid for the death with their lives. It was a sacrifice that the Emperor was willing to make; his army was limitless in number, but the battle was costing them valuable time.

“What is it?” Aziz asked his old friend.

“We’re moving faster than we should be,” Adaq answered.

Like most Rigarians, Adaq was not experienced in the use of Manaa as it had been deemed unholy by the Muntiari generations earlier. However, when travelling abroad he had spent some time in various academies and, though he would never consider himself an expert of the craft, he was able to sense when something was happening.

“I think so too,” Henry agreed, “but I always thought of it as a myth.”

“Thought of what?” Shahad joined the conversation.

“The roads,” he started, “were supposed to make travel much faster. Every step you take in here is like a hundred out there.” He said pointing to the fringes of the roadway on either side. “I just can’t believe it’s true.”

“It seems to be,” Adaq said more to himself than to the prince.

“What seems to be?” asked Aziz, whose expertise lay more in matters of state and military affairs than ancient myths and Manaa.

“It seems that we are moving incredibly fast,” Adaq responded. “I think we’ll be at The Great Wall in no time at all.”

Shahad observed the obvious as the other three discussed the theory. “Won’t Xang be aware of this?” she said rhetorically.

“Yes,” the answer came from Adaq.

“Then shouldn’t we pick up the pace?” she suggested.

“Yes,” the three said in unison.

None of them voiced their concerns that they were running headlong into a hostile force. It was Henry’s duty to prevent the Tabula from falling into enemy hands and the three Rigarians were more than aware that if the Tabula did make it across the border, the first nation to feel the wrath gained from the knowledge would be Al-Rigar.

The four picked up the pace and began to jog along the old thoroughfare; the three men drawing their swords and the noblewoman notching an arrow as they did so.

Ambassador Xang exited the archway and entered a world of chaos. As far as the eye could see were blood, gore and dying men. Nearby two men rolled on the floor, locked in fevered combat, their weapons abandoned nearby.

Without remorse, Xang pulled a dirk from his belt and slit the throat of the New Sobriun mercenary who had been getting the better of his fellow countryman. “Who commands?” Xang demanded of the exhausted imperial soldier.

“The General,” the man managed to elucidate between breaths as he gulped for air, “on the battlements.” The man concluded.

Ambassador Xang swore loudly. He had the Tabula hidden in his robe; no Manaa remaining and the simple task of negotiating a battlefield stood between him and his final goal. “Get your weapon,” he said to the swordsman, “and then follow me.”

The appearance of the ambassador was not lost on the tall red headed leader of the New Sobriun forces who, as he dispatched yet another imperial soldier, left his place in the line and made his way directly for Xang.

This is what he had been waiting for.

The four, having jogged for the past several minutes, could now see the archway that led to The Great Wall.

“Halt,” Aziz commanded.

The small party came to a halt just on the other side of the threshold that led to the escalating savagery and desperation that awaited them only a footstep away. ”Are you with us highness?” Aziz asked of the Rubrumterran prince.

“Of course,” Henry responded, a little confused by the question.

“Because if we have to destroy the Tabula before we are cut to pieces by a thousand angry Tsukese soldiers, I am more than willing to make that sacrifice.”

“Agreed,” said Henry. The prince intended to honour the agreement that dual custody should be taken of the document, but taking into account current circumstances; he knew that such a sacrifice may have to be made. “But only if it is a last resort,” the prince added as an endnote.

“Agreed,” Aziz echoed Henry’s previous acknowledgement.

All of them were resigned to the fact that it may be the last thing that they ever did, yet none of them voiced their concerns as they stepped through the portal and into bedlam.

Xang had steadily recruited more and more bodyguards as he had made his way towards The Great Wall and now employed over ten protectors. They chopped down any soldier who stood in the ambassador's way whilst he journeyed through the battle, forging him a pathway to safety. But then he was there. A tall red headed soldier barred the way.

The first two soldiers weren't even aware of his presence until it was too late, paying with their lives for their lack of vigilance. An archer loosed an arrow which, under usual circumstances would have disembowelled the warrior, but it was simply diverted by an invisible barrier moments before striking its target. Enraged, the man chopped down a further three of the ambassador's bodyguard and Xang knew he was facing a phenomenal opponent.

Being a member of the order, he had often performed such incarnations to provide himself and favoured subjects with such protection and he knew how difficult such extensive safeguards were to break. Quickly formulating a plan, he waited as the soldier killed all but one of the guardsmen he had recruited; only the archer remained.

The red headed warrior was now within earshot and Xang put his plan into action. "Stop," he shouted at the large New Sobriun.

“Why should I?” the man called back, taking a giant stride in the direction of the ambassador.

Xang could see the blood and gore meandering its way down the invisible barrier that protected the huge man from physical attacks. “You know why,” Xang called back, “I could easily destroy it.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” the mercenary said. But the words had their intended effect; the man stopped his advance. “Why shouldn’t I just come over there and kill you?”

The man was clearly running on adrenaline after slaughtering so many imperial soldiers with such ease and Xang knew that this would play to his advantage.

“I have what you want,” Xang ignored the threat, “but I want to live.”

“They said you were a coward…the ones who told me to find you,” the warrior said. He thought for a moment before continuing, “I’ll take it from you…and I’ll let you live.”

The sheer arrogance of the man was almost cause enough for Xang to lose his temper but, thoroughly aware that any rash action could cost him his life, he continued. “I’ll throw it to you,” Xang started, “but how can I be sure that you won’t kill me once you have it?” he asked.

“Once I have it I’ll be gone. You’re nothing to me…why should I care if you live or die?” the towering soldier spat back.

“Well that will have to do,” Xang said as he reached inside his pocket. In the same breath he also whispered, “ready?” to the one remaining soldier at his side.

The ambassador took out the Tabula from beneath his robe and tossed it into the air. Hunger shone brightly in the New Sobriun’s eyes as the precious document arched through the air.

“There he is,” Shahad said and began running in the direction of Xang.

The others were only just behind her and watched in horror as the old scroll travelled through the air. They had not believed Xang so vain as to value his life above the most powerful knowledge ever acquired in the history of The Four Continents.

Xang watched as the New Sobriun seemed transfixed by the Tabula and the path it made towards the red headed warrior. The old scroll was mere inches from the soldier’s palm when something odd happened.

The blood and gore that, until an instant ago, had been making its way down the invisible barrier that protected the soldier from physical attacks suddenly leapt onto the man's tabard.

"Fire," Xang ordered of the archer stood by his side.

The archer released the arrow which gracefully soared across the short distance and embedded its head deep into the heart of the New Sobriun. The man looked shocked but uttered no words as he collapsed into a pool of blood; the Tabula still clutched in his right fist.

"Hurry," Xang said to the archer. The two ran towards the motionless body as the ambassador considered how well his plan had worked. Having employed the ward himself, Xang was more than aware that the soldier would have to disengage its protective qualities should he wish to catch the Tabula: one of the great strengths of the ward also being its greatest weakness. Fortunately, the archer hadn't hesitated and had shot his arrow at the exact moment that he had been ordered to so; when the red headed warrior had been defenceless.

Xang and his guard were almost at the body of the dead New Sobriun when the ambassador felt a body crash into his side and he was knocked to the floor. The ambassador's reflexes were almost cat-like and, rolling on his side,

he avoided the point of a dirk which found only empty space. Quickly finding his feet, the ambassador surveyed the scene realising that his final bodyguard had been slain and that he was lucky to have survived the assault. To his surprise, the assailant had been a woman.

“Who are you?” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“None of your concern,” Shahad retorted as she lunged forward with the dagger.

Once more she was astonished by the ambassador’s reflexes as he first moved back then, as the Rigarian woman overbalanced, snatched the short blade from her hand, spinning her round in the process. Aziz and Adaq arrived on the scene too late: Xang held the blade across Shahad’s neck, warning them that any false move would result in her death. Aziz had his blade drawn but Adaq had acquired a bow during the sprint. He held one solitary burning arrow; obviously intended for the ambassador should he leave himself exposed.

However, it was neither Adaq nor Aziz who spoke as Henry joined the deadlock, “Looking for this?” he asked the ambassador. The prince was holding the Tabula which he had recovered from the dead New Sobriun’s grasp during the escapade.

“Give it to me,” Xang demanded.

“Give me the girl first,” Henry said.

“No,” Xang replied. “You’d never give up the Tabula willingly.”

“I would do to prevent a war between Al-Rigar and Rubrumterra,” Henry replied.

Confusion was evident in the ambassador’s face until he looked down at the woman he held at knife point and recognition replaced his previous expression. “Ah,” he started, “this must be the fine lady Shahad.”

“She is,” Aziz interrupted, “and if she is not returned unharmed, Tabula or no, I promise you the most unpleasant of deaths.”

The fighting was continuing around them and, to Xang’s dismay, he realised that the imperial troops were being beaten back by the smaller allied force. “Give it here,” Xang said as he lurched forward in an attempt to grab the ancient document.

The Tabula fell to the floor and, to the Horror of Henry and Xang, Adaq loosened the burning arrow; pinning the Tabula to the floor and engulfing it in flames.

Still holding Shahad hostage, Xang barraged Adaq with a series of insults not too uncommonly heard in the seediest dockside taverns in the eastern Tsukese Empire before he regained his composure. “I still learnt much during my travel. Lots of ancient knowledge that I can take back to my masters,” he countered. “Sobrius and Rigar will be no match for our might.”

Henry knew what the ambassador said was probably exaggerated, yet didn’t want to risk it. “Your army is at a stalemate, the rest are either on the wall or off chasing the other flank and you won’t survive to share your knowledge.”

“Yes I will,” Xang said, appearing more and more desperate by the moment. “So long as I have her…isn’t that right Sheikh Aziz?”

Aziz was caught between two minds; a conscious tear between his heart and his duty. He was fully aware that Xang had enjoyed several days alone with the scroll to study its secrets and had witnessed first-hand the knowledge that he had gained from it. However, he was not willing to sacrifice Shahad under the presumption that the ambassador had learnt every last secret contained within the Tabula. “Let him go,” Aziz said in resignation.

“What?” Henry cried in disbelief.

“Let him go,” Aziz repeated. The Rubrumterran prince was about to object when the sheikh continued, “This is my sovereign territory and I will be obeyed.”

“As you wish highness,” Henry replied. Though the young prince had only spent a few days with Aziz and Shahad, it was evident to him that there was much more between the two than ruler and subject. Once more he found himself thinking of a tall woman in Heim and, feeling compassion for their plight, moved away from Xang.

To Aziz it felt like an eternity but, in a matter of minutes, Xang had backed away a substantial distance before, firmly holding Shahad by the wrist, he turned and fled towards The Great Gate.

After a moment, they were no longer visible amongst the fighting bodies.

Aziz fell to his knees, utterly despondent. His pain was inexplicable. He felt as if a vast gulf had replaced the place where his heart had once beaten.

Though he didn't fully understand it, he had come to treasure Shahad and her liberal ways. He had even found himself fantasying about the two of them being married when he had allowed his mind to wonder. He: the powerful yet generous ruler of a newly emerging nation and she: the beautiful bride who the people cared for and loved dearly. This dream had been shattered, smashed into a hundred pieces, and he had been helpless to prevent it. Shahad was gone now. She had been taken by Xang into another country; another continent, and Aziz found himself hating every moment that they were separated for.

"Highness, you have to get up," Adaq said urgently. "We need to get you out of here."

"I know," Aziz mumbled in response.

The imperial troops were pouring out of The Great Gate with renewed vigour. The few remaining Al-Rigarian soldiers were fleeing in an organised rout as the New Sobriun mercenaries faltered in their staunch defence of the archway.

It was Henry who brought Aziz to his senses. "Highness," he started, "I can feel your pain. But with God as a witness I promise that you'll get her

back!” Henry paused, more for effect than a need to draw breath, “but right now men are dying and your Kingdom’s being invaded. Your men need you.”

The speech had its intended affect and the sheikh instantly began giving orders. At first the demoralised and exhausted men were unsure whether or not to listen to the newcomer, but on learning that he was the Sheikh of Al-Rigar, they dug deep within themselves and discovered newfound vigour and determination. Gradually, a chain of command was established and the men fought with purpose once more.

However, the situation was hopeless. The Al-Rigarian and New Sobriun force was a paltry two thousand facing an ever increasing imperial force of just over twenty, they had to find a way out.

“Highness,” Adaq said as he reached over a New Sobriun soldier in the front rank to stab an imperial soldier in the chest. “We need a plan.”

“I know,” Aziz replied as he too took care of another carless imperial soldier. “Withdraw to the rear and bring Henry with you…I have an idea.”

Aziz had been thinking long and hard about his next move. His moment of despair had only clouded his judgement temporarily and now that a strategy had formed in his conscious mind, he was determined to see it through. It was

a desperate ploy; one that would see Shahad safe and hopefully spare the lives of the few remaining soldiers, but it was the only option left available to him.

The sheikh moved to the rear of the line where he met with his first advisor and a bleeding Henry. “Are you ok?” he asked the Prince.

“Fine…really…it’s just a scratch,” Henry said as he wiped away some of the blood from his forehead. It was evident that the injury was superficial, just a knock to the head by a stray arm or shield amongst the cramped fighting conditions.

“Okay,” Aziz said and he began the process of outlining his plan to his two companions. It wasn’t long before he was finished and, as he had expected, Adaq’s eyes were wide with horror.

“You can’t do it,” the first minister blurted out, forgoing all protocol.

On very few occasions throughout their friendship Aziz had been forced to remind Adaq of his position beneath him but, evidently, this was going to have to be one of them. “Remember my oath Adaq,” he said, “my responsibility to the people and their protection.”

“Is this a responsibility to all of your subjects or to one in particular?” Adaq half-asked, half-accused.

“It is not your place to question that,” Aziz snapped back.

A lifetime of court drilling and generations of unquestioned obedience to tribal leaders prevented the argument from progressing any further. “As you wish my sheikh,” was all that Adaq said.

Aziz was sorry to see his old friend so upset and knew that the first minister’s concern for him only stemmed from love.

“And what would you have me do in your absence?” Adaq continued.

“You’ll return to Qahtani and take command of the city’s defences. This army will be at the door of the city in a matter of days and it has to hold.”

“Yes highness,” was all that Adaq could muster.

“And me?” Henry asked, more accustomed with giving orders than receiving them but willing to make an exception in such dire circumstances.

“Please,” Aziz started, aware that he was speaking to an equal and a friend, “please, save my men. Take them back through the archway and save as many of them as you can. Once you have done me this great honour, I will consider myself in your debt.”

The prince thought for a moment without saying anything, then he spoke solemnly, “I accept. I will do what I can for your men but after I must

return to Sobrius and Rubrumterra. It won't be long before the Anriac Bay is full of Tsukese pirates and their armies will surely attempt an invasion of Heim. Sobrius will need me then."

Aziz did nothing but nod and the two briefly shook hands to seal the agreement.

"Now for my part," Aziz began, "I'll need your help."

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Xang's master bellowed with anger, "How could you be so stupid!" he shouted amongst a montage of colourful profanities.

"But master, I have…" Xang started, his head bowed in shame.

"You have nothing. Just a Rigarian tramp of little value to me!" he shouted.

The old scholar, usually so calm and collected, couldn't help but vent his anger. The most precious document in The Four Continents, the very reason for his being since childhood, had been destroyed. He had felt an odd sensation when the Tabula had been engulfed in blue flames, as if a part of his heritage had been destroyed. Nobody else who was still breathing could share his pain.

“Not just that master,” Xang continued from his prior interruption. “I memorised everything, everything contained within the Tabula.”

“Oh don’t be so naïve,” his master snapped. “The knowledge is just one aspect, but the scroll itself contained power. And now it’s gone! Never to be wielded again!”

The old man had dreamt of that power since learning from his father his true legacy; that the knowledge contained within had survived was of some comfort to him though. The Tsuki Empire and The Order itself would be able to use the information to wage war against Sobrius and Rigar and, eventually, New Sobrius itself. However, the war would have been over in days had he received the Tabula intact.

“Sorry master,” Xang bowed down further. “I trust I will be expelled from The Order?” he asked.

The old scholar purposefully took his time to make the decision, posing in mock deliberation before finally saying, “No, you shan’t.” He paused before continuing, “Despite your failing today, you are probably the most important member of The Order now.”

For the first time since returning to Tsukese soil, Xang felt pleased.

“As one, move!” Henry called across the shambles of a line that barely remained intact.

He had spent the previous twenty minutes identifying sergeants and officers who were still capable to relay orders; there hadn’t been very many. However, he had managed, with the help of Aziz, to set up a fairly reliable network and was now ready to retreat.

He was pleased to see the front two ranks battle forward, killing many imperial soldiers in the process, before turning to flee towards the mysterious archway behind them. This initial momentum was followed by a volley of arrows from the archers who then joined the rout. The ploy had the desired effect as some of the imperial soldiers had already retreated, while others were disorientated by the scores of arrowheads piercing their ranks. This gave the men the few seconds that they needed to get a head start on their foes.

Fortunately the archway had been designed to accommodate such a large force and Prince Henry found himself, along with Adaq and a few other volunteers, fighting a rear-guard action.

The prince and the first minister were the last to enter the portal.

The pursuing imperial soldiers were called back by their officers where they made neat formations before giving pursuit along the ancient roadway. The officers were confident that they could destroy the paltry allied force of New Sobriuns and Al-Rigarians but wanted to keep as much of their army intact as possible for the inevitable siege of Qahtani.

The ground shook as one hundred thousand imperial soldiers took to the ancient roadway and marched towards the vital stronghold that held the key to all Al-Rigar: Qahtani. The soldiers were followed by supply carts, powered by oxen and then finally a rear-guard of a further ten thousand troops. The process took an hour and a half but eventually the last soldier past through the portal; the sound of his boots a distant echo as he was transported with unnatural speed across the Rigarian Desert. With the troops despatched, the gatekeepers began the laborious process of shutting the gargantuan structure that sealed their border to the remainder of the known world.

Unseen by any of them, one of the ‘dead’ Rigarian soldiers sat up. He quickly looked around, taking note of his bearings before retrieving an expensively crafted blade from amongst two nearby bodies. The ‘dead’ man then dashed towards The Great Gate and was forced to roll under the narrow gap before it firmly shut.

Aziz had made it into the Tsuki Empire.

Shahad had been determined to deny her captors the satisfaction of revealing her distress in public, but now that she was alone she wept openly. The manacles dug into her wrists, drawing blood, and the brutal slap she had received at the hands of the muscular jailer had stung harshly. She lay on a cold stone floor on a meagre bed of straw accompanied by rats and their excrement.

The Tsukese notoriously treated their prisoners harshly, though she had expected a slightly milder handling due to her rank and gender. However, she currently endured the worst conditions of her life and couldn't help but let her emotions overwhelm her.

Hearing a key in the door, she quickly did her best to dry her eyes before the door opened and the jailer entered accompanied by a stranger. "Get up," the jailer said.

Shahad stood up, every inch of her body hurting as she did so. "What is it?" she asked defiantly.

"You," the stranger said in heavily accented Rigarian. "Come with me," he finished.

It was obvious to Shahad that the man wasn't overly familiar with her native tongue so she replied in perfect Tsukese, "Why should I?"

If the stranger was taken aback by her attitude or her ability to speak Tsukese, he didn't show it and responded harshly, "You will work for me now."

Shahad was a little worried by the revelation and her face clearly showed her angst.

"Not like that," the man laughed, "I have plenty of beautiful women for that. You will be a slave. You will break rocks in my quarry until you die."

Though a horrible prospect, it was a much healthier alternative to what she had first suspected. As a Rigarian noblewoman, Shahad's modesty was the most valuable thing that she possessed; even above her life.

To bring the gathering to a close the jailer struck Shahad across the face, rendering her unconscious.

Henry was the last man to cross the threshold and set foot in the desert of Al-Rigar. He had been fighting side-by-side with Adaq and the volunteers as they had retreated down the ancient roadway. Turning around he was pleased

to see that the allied soldiers were organised and already drawing their bows to offer some resistance before the inevitable flood of imperial troops poured out of the portal.

“Stand back highness,” Paul said weakly.

The spymaster looked awful and Henry could barely recognise his companion. A multitude of red veins pulsed blood along the surface of his retina and extraordinarily dark circles ringed his orbs. His naturally olive skin, a legacy of his Rigarian heritage, was paler than Henry had ever imagined it could be and the feint wrinkle lines that usually adorned his visage were now deep crevices snaking their way across Paul’s face.

“Are you ok?” Henry asked, though still fully aware of the impending attack from beyond the portal.

“Not now highness, I have to close the road,” Paul said.

The spymaster had watched Magda and Lottë reveal and conceal the roadways in Heim numerous times in the past and felt he had a good understanding of the incantation required to perform such acts, yet he knew that he didn’t possess the necessary bloodline to do so. Taking this into account, he had arrived at the simplest conclusion: to destroy the archway once and for all.

Paul had regained consciousness several minutes before the soldiers from The Great Wall had started their retreat, giving him valuable time to study the old archway. He had used the time to delicately probe at the ancient structure using mental tentacles to discern its properties, strengths and weaknesses; finding something most astounding. The road was made from Manaa itself. Ancient Manaa that had been bent and worked by long dead craftsmen into a thing of beauty; allowing traders and travellers to move swiftly and safely from one city to another. It was now Paul's task to undo their good work. Drawing on the copious quantity of Manaa that the ancient architects had used to craft the roadway, Paul concentrated every fibre of his mental strength on the task at hand.

The craftsmanship was meticulous, the visionary detail incredible, yet it was also exceptionally fragile. Conscious of the fact that an imperial army waited on the other side of the portal, Paul picked at one of the innumerable tiny threads which held the entire tapestry of the woven road in place. The effect was instantaneous.

The archway retreated into the sand as quickly as it had first appeared, revealing thousands of imperial troops along the lengthy roadway. The journey that had previously taken minutes was now an expedition, spanning days in time. As the enchantment failed imperial soldiers, previously hidden by the old

causeway, appeared at intermittent intervals along the now visible roadway. Though they posed no imminent military threat in their current disorganised and bewildered condition, the imperial forces were huge in number and there was clearly only one option available to the Al-Rigarian forces and their allies.

“Retreat,” Henry informed Rehman.

The hardy old campaigner began barking orders at the newly arrived soldiers as well as his Legionnaires who had managed to finish off the first imperial soldiers through the portal. The men, most of them exhausted and demoralised from hours of fighting, formed up in what barely resembled a military column.

As the hastily organised column began their withdrawal towards Qahtani, four men remained and held conference.

“The sheikh?” Derek Mulnazi inquired.

“He stayed behind,” Henry answered. The loyal sergeant major appeared confused from the revelation, forcing the prince to elaborate further. “They took Shahad. He went after her.”

“Over The Great Wall?” Derek said, seemingly shocked by the achievement.

“Yes,” Henry answered bluntly. Looking at Adaq, the Rubrumterran prince continued his conversation with Derek. “He’ll be needing help,” Henry said bluntly.

Adaq realised what Henry was doing. Henry was obviously trying to encourage the faithful servant to forgo his duties with the army and to aid the sheikh in his quest to free Shahad from the dungeons of the Tsukese. “It can be arranged sergeant major, but only if you wish to go,” the first minister said.

Finally realising what was being implied, Derek said, “without hesitation sir.”

“Okay sergeant major. With Prince Henry and Major Paul Ajalasi of Rubrumterra as my witnesses, I hereby formally discharge you from the Royal Al-Rigarian army immediately. However,” Adaq paused to smile, “as a reward for your loyalty and service, I present you with this sack of bread and this flask of water,” he handed Derek a small package before continuing, “and will further allow you to retain your government issued weapon.”

It was customary for departing soldiers to be presented with land and a small allocation of silver coins however, considering current circumstances; Derek was much more appreciative of his retirement gift. He also suspected that should he return with the sheikh and Shahad, his discharge decoration

may alter significantly. Smiling he said, “Thank you sir. And with your leave I’ll be on my way.”

“Very good Derek. However I do have some advice for you on entering civilian life,” Adaq replied.

“And what would that be?” Derek inquired in amusement.

“Keep to the desert. The road seems to be rather congested with Tsukese these days,” the first minister replied.

Unable to hide his mirth, Derek laughed out loud. “Thank you sir. I think I’ll take the long way round.”

Prince Henry expected the ceremony to last a little longer but, without further commotion, Derek Mulnazi collected his few belongings and walked into the desert.

Once he had travelled out of earshot Henry asked Adaq, “Will he be okay?”

The first minister seemed troubled by the question and answered frankly, “He’ll be fine in the desert. His kind have been living a nomadic existence for generations. But at The Great Wall and beyond...” he allowed the thought to go unfinished.

Changing the subject, Henry said, “I have to return to Rubrumterra.”

“But we need leadership here. That army will be at Qahtani within the week and we have no way to combat Xang and their other users of Manaa.”

“I know,” Henry started, “that’s why I’ll leave Paul with you.”

The spymaster, mentally exhausted from the attack that he had suffered earlier, attempted to protest against the decision but Paul cut him off. “You’re too weak to travel,” he started, “and you’ll be needed here when the Tsukese arrive.”

Paul couldn’t object to the logic behind the prince’s conclusion. Resigned to the fact that he’d be staying behind he asked Henry, “Where will you go?”

“First to Heim, then back home,” Henry said.

“A sound plan,” Paul replied. “I wish you luck.”

“I’m not the one who’ll be contending with a hundred thousand imperial soldiers and a madman capable of burning entire ships,” Henry half joked.

“That’s true,” Paul retorted.

Without saying another word, the three men shook one another’s hand in turn. Adaq and Paul joined the retreating column as the Rubrumterran prince made his way into the desert alone.